The Sporting News

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PRO FOOTBALL 2026

128 PAGES OF TEAM PREVIEWS

POWER RANKINGS
FOR ALL 32 NFL TEAMS

PLAYOFF AND SUPER BOWL PREDICTIONS

CALEB WILLIAMS

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JOSH ALLEN

WILL THE RAMS, CHIEFS, BILLS OR BEARS DETHRONE THE SEAHAWKS?

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2026 PRO FOOTBALL PREVIEW
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The Sporting News

PRO FOOTBALL

2026

Jaxon Smith-Njigba

Contents

4 POWER RANKINGS
The pecking order of all 32 NFL teams heading into the new season

8 COUNTDOWN TO KICKOFF!
The eight most compelling storylines heading into the 2026 season

12 NOTABLE NEWCOMERS
Several faces will appear in new places this year

14 SUPER CLOCK IS TICKING
Will next February mark the third straight year with a first-time Super Bowl–winning quarterback?

15 BREAKOUT BREAKDOWN
Catch these potential surprises in 2026

16 PREVIEWS AND PREDICTIONS
Loaded with Super Bowl contenders at the top of both conferences, the NFL has eight to 10 teams that have a chance to win it all

TEAM PREVIEWS

18 AFC EAST

34 AFC NORTH

50 AFC SOUTH

66 AFC WEST

82 NFC EAST

98 NFC NORTH

114 NFC SOUTH

130 NFC WEST

The Seahawks believed Sam Darnold was their man last season.

But they didn't need him to be The Man.

General manager John Schneider built a roster that had a swarming defense, playmakers such as Sporting News Offensive Player of the Year Jaxon Smith-Njigba to support Darnold on offense, and strong special teams.

In other words, the Seahawks had an elite all-around team, one that dominated in multiple ways during its Super Bowl run. The Seahawks led the league in points allowed (17.4), didn't have a turnover in the playoffs and their 246 point differential was the most by a Super Bowl champion since 1999.

At The Sporting News, we believe we have an elite team as well. Senior writers Bill Bender and Vinnie Iyer have 44 years of experience combined at SN, with Iyer having covered 14 Super Bowls. So while this is our first NFL preview print publication in a decade, we still have the experience and expertise—including 140 years as a brand—to help prep you for the upcoming season. (We also have a college football preview on newsstands now, and other special editions are being planned.)

As for the 2026 season? There are plenty of top-tier QBs gunning for Darnold and the Seahawks, including Josh Allen, who's still aiming for his first Super Bowl appearance, and Patrick Mahomes, who is perhaps the biggest wild card as he returns from a torn ACL.

You'll find all the key storylines and our 2026 predictions inside. And of course, we'll provide updated news and analysis at *sportingnews.com*, where we're also ranking the greatest NFL teams, players and moments before the start of the season, to coincide with our 140th anniversary. Learn more at *sportingnews.com/us/140*.

Benson Taylor
Editor-in-Chief

Power Rankings

The pecking order of all 32 NFL teams heading into the new season

BY VINNIE IYER

The 2025 NFL season was full of surprises with some new contenders emerging from the NFC and AFC, culminating with the Seahawks beating the Patriots in Super Bowl 60. Even with a few more established playoff teams, there are bound to be a fair share of similar twists and turns in 2026.

Starting with last year's best and then getting into the rest makes sense for our NFL offseason power rankings. Seattle and other top teams should stay strong, but the league is always prime for quick rebounds and short turnarounds. More than half of the NFL is capable of competing for one of the 14 playoff spots. Expect plenty of shakeup in the battle for Super Bowl supremacy along the way.

1. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

The Seahawks took some hits in free agency, including Super Bowl 60 MVP running back Kenneth Walker III. They rebounded in the draft and kept their defensive foundation intact, but Seattle will be hoping to maintain its balanced big-play offense without Klint Kubiak. Sam Darnold should come back with more confidence as a ring-winning quarterback.

2. LOS ANGELES RAMS

The Rams' offense was explosive last season, led by the ageless Matthew Stafford, but their defense cost them repeatedly—especially in the NFC championship game loss to the Seahawks. They got aggressive to improve at cornerback, trading for Trent McDuffie. There is a case to be made for Sean McVay having his most complete team.

Matthew Stafford

3. BUFFALO BILLS

The Bills decided to shake up their team at the top by replacing Sean McDermott. New coach Joe Brady maintains the offensive mojo for Josh Allen, who also got a new top receiver in the trade for DJ Moore. Giving the defense a new look with base 3-4 can manufacture more big plays McDermott's squads lacked on that side of the ball. These changes to further empower Allen and shake up his support will finally help the Bills break through.

4. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Putting the Chiefs this high again after their playoff-missing mess that included Patrick Mahomes' late major knee injury puts faith in how Andy Reid and the coaches keep getting the right youthful replacements to support their veteran core. They also will go back to an effective running game to better complement the retooled defense.

5. BALTIMORE RAVENS

The Ravens wanted dramatic change and got it by replacing John Harbaugh with former Chargers defensive coordinator Jesse Minter. While he works on restoring their traditional strength vs. run and pass, Lamar Jackson will focus on clicking with the third offensive coordinator of his career.

6. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

The Patriots will try to avoid a Super Bowl hangover and overcome a distraction-filled offseason for coach Mike Vrabel. Giving Drake Maye more support overall to build on his breakout season is the first step

toward remaining an AFC power. The defense also has reloaded well.

7. CHICAGO BEARS

Caleb Williams looks like the Bears' long-awaited answer as the franchise QB, paired with the perfect coach, Ben Johnson. Chicago has scratched only the surface of its explosive offense's potential and the defense is positioned to keep helping with takeaways.

8. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

The Eagles underwent big schematic and personnel changes around Jalen Hurts, trying to replace the past offensive drama under Nick Sirianni with steady production. The defense is also positioned well to return its championship pass-rush pop.

9. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

The 49ers navigated an injury-riddled season, benefitting from a favorable schedule and a healthy Christian McCaffrey. They will need all of CMC's production to support Brock Purdy in a transitional passing game. The defense should have Nick Bosa and Fred Warner back healthy to help avoid another early playoff exit.

10. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

The Chargers made some changes to try to get over the playoff hump with Jim Harbaugh, adding Mike McDaniel to help unlock Justin Herbert and the offense. They will make up for Minter's loss with similar defensive concepts and still-strong personnel.

11. DENVER BRONCOS

Bo Nix's ankle injury kept the Broncos just short of reaching the Super Bowl. The goal was to give him a more reliable running game and a versatile passing game, now armed with Jaylen Waddle. They don't need to boost much, retaining a dominant defense on every level.

12. GREEN BAY PACKERS

The Packers' biggest hits came in losing defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley and backup QB Malik Willis. They are counting on healthy seasons from Micah Parsons and Jordan Love to offset those losses after retooling around each on both sides of the ball.

13. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Trevor Lawrence finally got the right offensive-minded head coach in Liam Coen and there will be a focus on an even more explosive passing game with Lawrence losing longtime team-mate Travis Etienne in the running game. For the Jaguars to battle for the AFC crown, they need Travis Hunter and the defense to turn a corner.

14. DETROIT LIONS

Jared Goff and the offense slipped without Johnson and needed to make a change in scheme while undergoing key personnel transitions in the offensive line and backfield. They should be more creative passing but a bounce back into the playoffs will hinge more on Dan Campbell's defense.

15. HOUSTON TEXANS

The Texans will once again field a mighty defense under DeMeco Ryans with Will Anderson Jr. and Danielle Hunter setting the edge. C.J. Stroud needed more help in his big contract season and the extra line and run support are much-needed improvements for Houston playing better complementary football.

16. CINCINNATI BENGALS

The Bengals are in the muddled middle because they can make a playoff push with a healthy Joe Burrow providing a high offensive floor. Whether or not they qualify comes down to the defense responding well to needed changes without Trey Hendrickson.

17. NEW YORK GIANTS

The Giants go into the season with plenty of buzz surrounding second-year QB Jaxson Dart playing for new coach John Harbaugh. Dart has a strong offensive line and a variety of weapons in Matt Nagy's system to help New York make a big leap with enough help from its defensive remix.

18. DALLAS COWBOYS

The Cowboys know they have the offense under Brian Schotteheimer to outscore anyone with George Pickens and Javonte Williams back in the fold with Dak Prescott and CeeDee Lamb. Blowing up the defense was smart, but it may take time before all the new pieces come together in the 3-4 concepts of former Eagles assistant Christian Parker.

19. PITTSBURGH STEELERS

The Steelers worked to make their quarterback's job much easier with big boosts to the receiving corps and offensive line, with the intent to be balanced and explosive under Mike McCarthy. Making the playoffs will require all that to pan out as they get less defensive-minded without Mike Tomlin.

20. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

The Colts are counting on Daniel Jones to pick up where he left off in his breakout season, fully recovered from Achilles surgery, with go-to downfield threat Alec Pierce back. The offense will have more pressure

Daniel Jones

after last season's fade, but there is promise they will get a lot more out of defense.

21. WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

Jayden Daniels' health is critical to the Commanders running it back to his rookie-season success. A coordinator change to David Blough should lead to more big pass plays with less running dependence. Dan Quinn is also taking a calculated chance his defense will respond better with someone else calling plays out of a new 3-4 base.

22. MINNESOTA VIKINGS

The Vikings are turning to Kyler Murray to solve their QB issues for Kevin O'Connell and rev up Justin Jefferson and the rest of the offense. Brian Flores' defense has lost some familiar pieces so it will be a challenge coaching the same playmaking force.

23. TENNESSEE TITANS

The Titans are another team to watch for a major uptick with second-year QB Cam Ward getting a boost from new top wide receiver Carnell Tate and a more dynamic offense under Brian Daboll. How much coach Robert Saleh's defense can improve will determine whether they crash the playoffs.

24. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

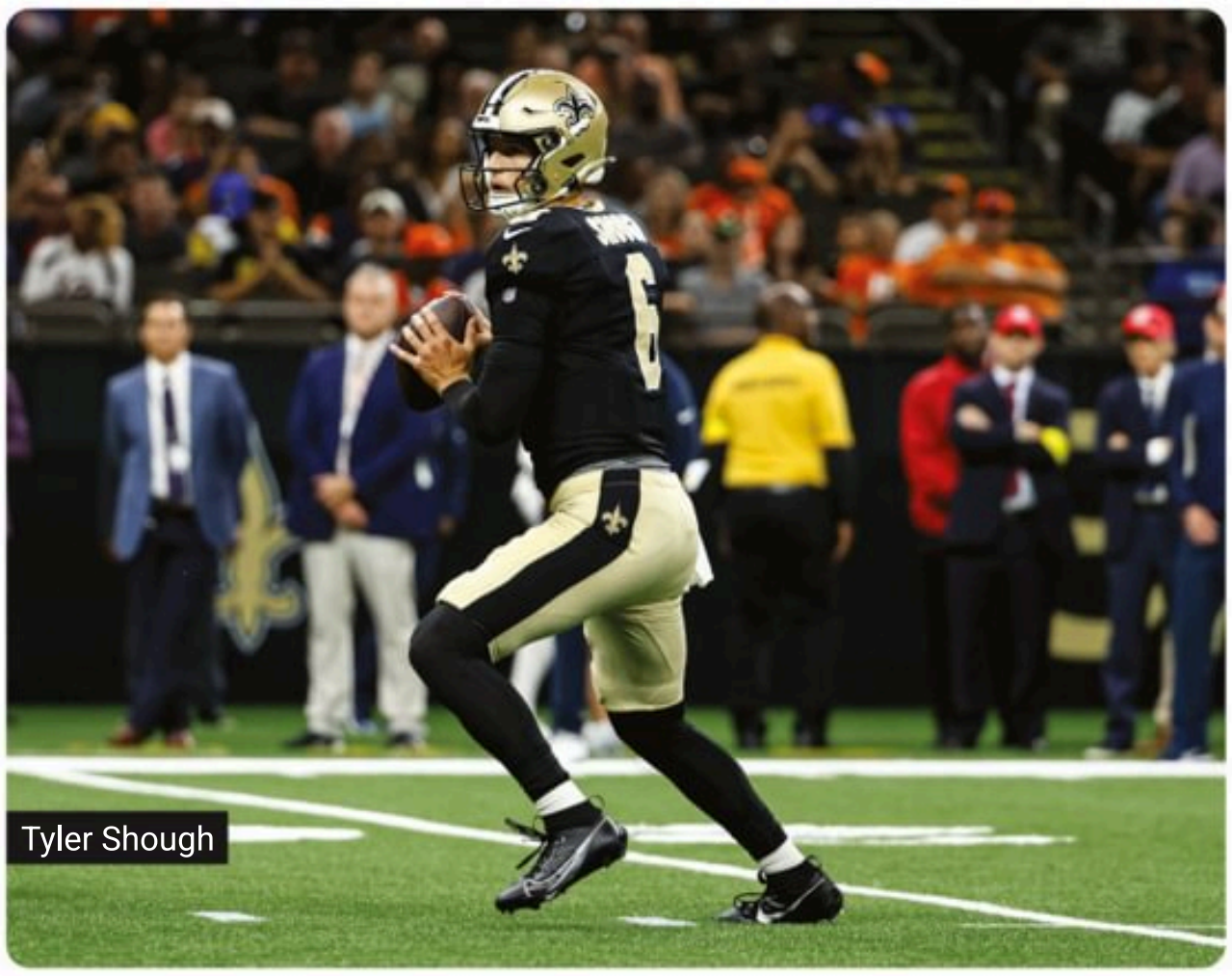
The NFC South is back to being a weak division. Despite the Bucs falling below .500 and losing their hold on the title, they are slight favorites. Baker Mayfield will need to find enough passing pop without Mike Evans, but the bigger concerns lie in Todd Bowles' transitional defense.

25. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Saints are taking a calculated shot with Tyler Shough as their new franchise quarterback after he responded well late in Kellen Moore's offense. They gave Shough more weapons expecting that he will make a leap in his second year.

26. CAROLINA PANTHERS

The Panthers enjoyed their playoff breakthrough with Bryce Young quarterbacking for Dave Canales.



Tyler Shough

They still have work to do to push above .500 and have a real shot at repeating the division. The offense and defense are both trending in the right direction.

27. LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

There is plenty of promise for the team Tom Brady part-owns, with Fernando Mendoza and Klint Kubiak headlining the offense to lift Brock Bowers and Ashton Jeanty. The Raiders should be more fun to watch and may have lucked out that they still have Maxx Crosby in front of a changed defense.

28. NEW YORK JETS

The Jets turned back the clock to land Geno Smith at quarterback again. The new offense has Breece Hall returning and rookies Kenyon Sadiq and Omar Cooper Jr. to help Smith and Garrett Wilson. Aaron Glenn's defense should also make a stronger impact in his second season.

29. ATLANTA FALCONS

The Falcons are back at the quarterback crossroads with Michael Penix Jr. and Tua Tagovailoa. New coach Kevin Stefanski's offense will operate with a different kind of depth at running back and receiver. The defense got its pass rush going last season so there's also a key reboot there.

30. ARIZONA CARDINALS

The Cardinals have QB drama in a messy bridge season with Jacoby Brissett and Gardner Minshew. Jeremiah Love and line upgrades suggest they want to operate a run-heavier offense after leading the league in pass attempts last season. Mike LaFleur is set to make his much-anticipated coaching debut to make the most out of the situation ahead.

31. CLEVELAND BROWNS

The Browns took a risk moving on from Stefanski in favor of former Ravens rival Todd Monken. Shedeur Sanders and the return of Deshaun Watson lead another crowded but uninspiring QB room. But Cleveland does have several bright spots thanks to back-to-back strong drafts yielding supporting casts on offense and the Myles Garrett–led defense.

32. MIAMI DOLPHINS

The Dolphins landed Malik Willis to replace Tagovailoa, following his defensive-minded coach Jeff Hafley from the Packers to South Beach. With an offensive rebuild in progress, Miami is counting on Willis' running to further complement a run-first attack and take heat off big changes on defense.

Patrick Mahomes

Countdown to Kickoff!

The eight most compelling storylines heading into the 2026 season

BY BILL BENDER

1 | RETURN OF THE KINGDOM

The Kansas City Chiefs finished 6-11 and missed the playoffs in 2025, which ended the run of three straight Super Bowl appearances and seven straight trips to the AFC championship game. Quarterback Patrick Mahomes enters his 10th season coming off a torn ACL and LCL but is expected to be ready for Week 1. Tight end Travis Kelce, who turns 37 in October, signed a three-year contract. Defensive tackle Chris Jones has three years left on a $158.75 million contract. Head coach Andy Reid, 68, brought back offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy. The band is back together with a few key additions.

The Chiefs signed Super Bowl MVP running back Kenneth Walker III from Seattle and drafted LSU cornerback Mansoor Delane and Clemson defensive tackle Peter Woods in the 2026 NFL Draft. Kansas City will always be a contender with Mahomes at QB, but it is safe to treat this season as the beginning of the back half of his career. Kansas City had a 1-5 record against AFC West opponents last season, a division that includes two returning playoff teams in the Broncos and Chargers and a revamped Raiders franchise around No. 1 pick Fernando Mendoza. The path back to the playoffs is tough. But we've learned not to doubt the Chiefs during the Mahomes-Reid era.

2 | JOSH ALLEN AND THE SUPER BOWL QUESTION

Josh Allen is the only player in the NFL who finished in the top five in the AP NFL MVP voting each of the last four seasons. Allen won the award in 2024 and took third last season. Only three other players—Lamar Jackson, Joe Burrow and Christian McCaffrey—have placed in the top five multiple times in those four years. Jackson is a two-time AP NFL MVP. Burrow and McCaffrey have played in the Super Bowl. Where does that leave Allen after a heart-breaking 33-30 loss against the Broncos in the AFC divisional playoffs on Jan. 17, 2026?

Buffalo fired Sean McDermott after nine seasons and promoted offensive coordinator Joe Brady as the new head coach. Brady is still best known as the passing game coordinator for LSU's record-setting national championship team in 2019—one that featured Burrow, Justin Jefferson and Ja'Marr Chase. Allen, who is 8-7 in the playoffs, faces more pressure than ever to get Buffalo back to the Super Bowl for the first time since the 1993 season.

3 | NFL TRAVELS TO LONDON, PARIS AND MORE ...

The NFL International Series features a Week 1 Thursday Night Football matchup between the 49ers and Rams in Melbourne, Australia. That is part of a larger international push. London will host three games, and the NFL also will have regular-season matchups in Paris, Madrid, Mexico City, Munich and Rio de Janeiro. That's nine games across four continents.

4 | JOHN HARBAUGH HITS THE BIG APPLE

Brady is one of 10 new coaches in the NFL this season, a list topped with John Harbaugh making the move from Baltimore to the New York Giants. Harbaugh ranks third among active coaches with 180 wins behind Reid (279) and Denver coach Sean Payton (184). Harbaugh spent 18 seasons with the Ravens. Now, he takes over a Giants team with an exciting young core that includes quarterback Jaxson Dart, running back Cam Skattebo and a defense that added first-round pick Arvell Reese to a pass rush that features Brian Burns and Abdul Carter.

Jesse Minter, Harbaugh's replacement in Baltimore, opens a new chapter in the rivalry with the Steelers, who replaced longtime coach Mike Tomlin with former Packers and Cowboys coach Mike McCarthy. Harbaugh and McCarthy are Super Bowl–winning coaches. Will they return the Lombardi Trophy to the Big Apple or Steel City?

Seattle offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak took the Raiders job. He's another high-profile hire. Kevin Stefanski left Cleveland for Atlanta, and the Browns hired Baltimore offensive coordinator Todd Monken. Green Bay defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley left for Miami, and Rams offensive coordinator Mike LaFleur took the Arizona job. Robert Saleh, who was the 49ers' defensive coordinator last season, gets a second chance as a head coach with the Tennessee Titans.

Which coach will have the most success in 2026?

5 | NEW ERA OF FERNANDOMANIA COMES TO LAS VEGAS

The Raiders selected Fernando Mendoza with the No. 1 pick in the 2026 NFL Draft, a reset for a franchise that has the fifth-worst record in the NFL since relocating

from Oakland before the 2020 season. Mendoza won the Heisman Trophy at Indiana and led a College Football Playoff championship run that was the real-life adaptation of the movie "Hoosiers." What will the next chapter look like in Las Vegas?

The Raiders have a new coach in Kubiak and enjoyed a grade-A draft to help accelerate a rebound around Mendoza, a charismatic quarterback who will be mentored by veteran Kirk Cousins. Mendoza inherits a supporting cast that features second-year running back Ashton Jeanty and tight end Brock Bowers. Las Vegas also kept elite pass rusher Maxx Crosby after a trade with the Ravens fell through because of a failed physical. Is "The Autumn Wind" returning for a franchise that hasn't won a playoff game since 2002?

6 | CHEESEHEAD VS. CHEESE GRATER

Packers-Bears is back. This classic NFL rivalry is cooking heading into 2026. Chicago beat Green Bay 22-16 in Week 16 on an overtime touchdown pass from Caleb Williams to DJ Moore—then took it to the next level by rallying from a 21-3 halftime deficit for a 31-27 victory in the NFC Wild Card round at Soldier Field on Jan. 10, 2026.

Of course, all that was without Green Bay edge rusher Micah Parsons on the field. The Packers beat the Bears 28-21 at Lambeau Field in Week 14 before Parsons suffered a season-ending torn ACL the following week at Denver. Green Bay's season imploded from there, and the Bears have the upper hand in this rivalry for the first time in a long time.

That is going to make those NFC North matchups even more entertaining in 2026. Chicago coach Ben Johnson and Green Bay coach Matt LaFleur are not on friendly terms. Williams and Green Bay quarterback Jordan Love are vying for that chance at a Super Bowl. Handshakes and locker-room celebrations are being over-analyzed. This might be the best this rivalry has been since George Halas and Curly Lambeau in the 1940s.

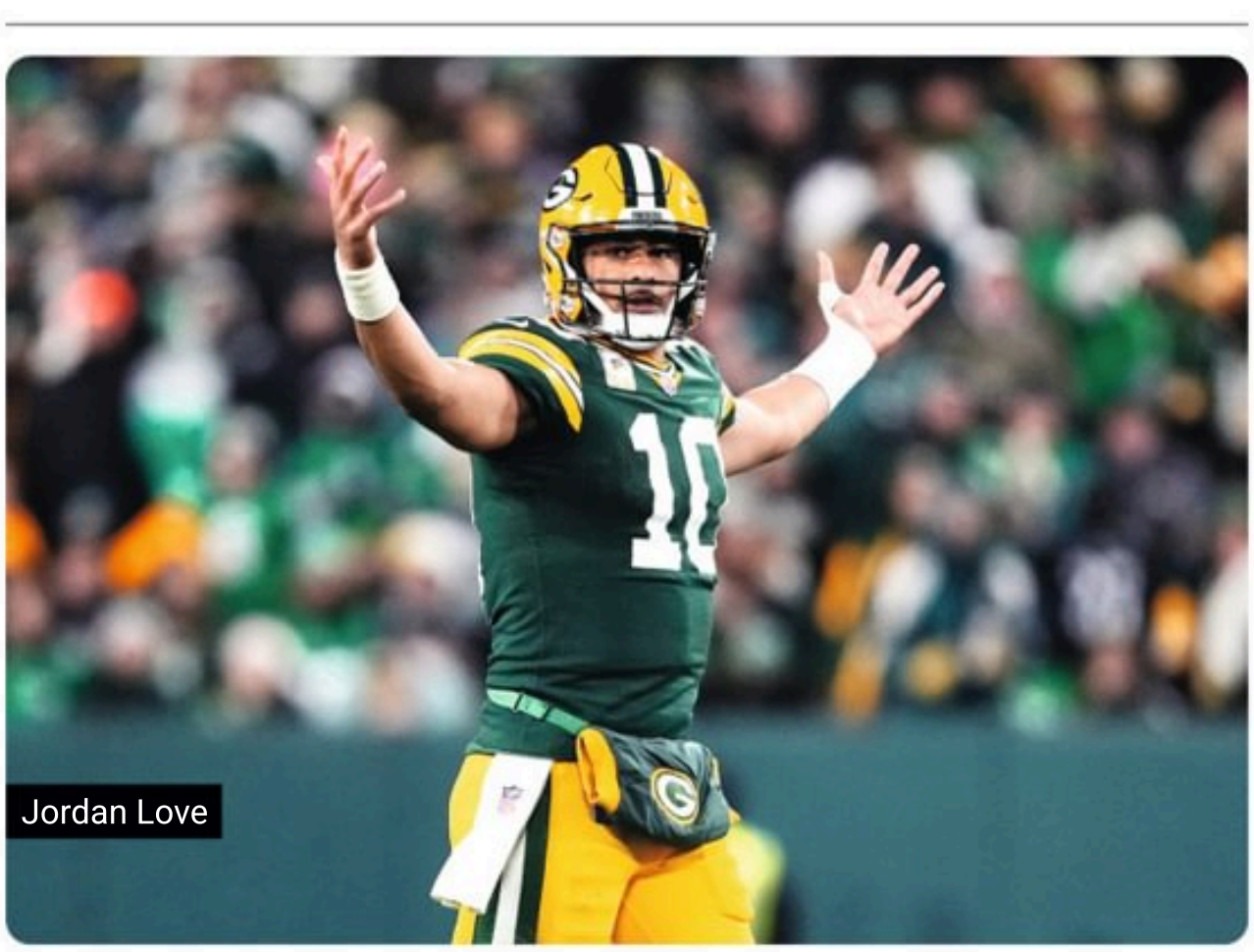
7 | EAGLES, COWBOYS UNDER PRESSURE

Either the Eagles or Cowboys have won the NFC East each of the last five seasons, and both enter 2026 with lofty aspirations. This high-visibility division always produces storylines, and this year will be no exception. Philadelphia won the division last season, but the Eagles had an inconsistent passing attack that ranked 23rd in the NFL. That led to an early NFC playoff exit one year after coach Nick Sirianni guided a Super Bowl championship run.

Eagles general manager Howie Roseman was aggressive as usual this offseason with trades that acquired Vikings pass rusher Jonathan Greenard and Packers receiver Dontayvion Wicks. It's a big year for Jalen Hurts, who still has three years remaining on a five-year, $255 million contract. Sirianni's temperature in Philadelphia varies constantly, and the competition will be better this year.

Dallas ranked second in the NFL with 391.9 total yards per game last season. The problem was Dallas couldn't stop anybody with a defense that allowed a league-worst 30.1 points per game. Jerry Jones traded up to get Ohio State safety Caleb Downs, which set the tone for a defense-heavy draft. If new defensive coordinator Christian Parker can flip this unit, then a return to the playoffs is in store.

Of course, Washington will look for a bounce-back season with third-year quarterback Jayden Daniels, and the Giants will be better with Harbaugh.



Jordan Love

8 | WILL THE SEAHAWKS REPEAT AS SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONS?

The Seahawks won the NFC West with a 14-3 record last season before beating the division rival 49ers and Rams in the NFC playoffs. That culminated with a dominant defensive performance in the 29-13 victory against New England in Super Bowl 60. Seattle coach Mike Macdonald has the pieces in place for another run with quarterback Sam Darnold and reigning NFL Offensive Player of the Year Jaxon Smith-Njigba. How will the Rams and 49ers respond?

Los Angeles drafted Alabama quarterback Ty Simpson with the No. 13 pick in the 2026 NFL Draft, which prompted questions about 2025 NFL MVP Matthew Staffford and his future with the franchise. The 49ers were saddled with injuries last season. San Francisco added receivers Mike Evans and Christian Kirk, and linebacker Dre Greenlaw returns after one year in Denver. The Seahawks, Rams and 49ers have combined for five Super Bowl appearances in the last eight seasons.

Sam Darnold
SUPER BOWL LX
CHAMPIONS
HAWKS
FEBRUARY 8
2026

Notable Newcomers

Several faces will appear in new places for the 2026 NFL season

BY VINNIE IYER

KLINT KUBIAK AND FERNANDO MENDOZA
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

Las Vegas is betting on part-owner Tom Brady turning around the team with this QB-coach combo that can flip the passing offense from meh to magical. Kubiak leaves his gig leading the Seahawks' Super Bowl–winning offense to work with the No. 1 overall pick at QB, a can't-miss pocket passer fresh off his national championship and Heisman Trophy–winning turn. Mendoza can jumpstart the team with recent first-rounders Brock Bowers and Ashton Jeanty.

JOE BRADY
BUFFALO BILLS

The Bills shook up their coaching staff with offensive coordinator Joe Brady promoted to the top job, replacing longtime leader Sean McDermott. While Josh Allen gets to keep the coordinator who lifted him to win NFL MVP, he is set up to be even better now armed with new top wide receiver DJ Moore, his best No. 1 since Stefon Diggs. Buffalo is built to be a big play machine to get over the hump.

JOHN HARBAUGH
NEW YORK GIANTS

The Giants are trying to reboot the Ravens in their own image with Jaxson Dart playing the role of Lamar Jackson for Harbaugh, whose dismissal from Baltimore set him up to take full control in New York. With plenty of juice around the second-year QB and rookie Arvell Reese adding yet another pass rusher, the Giants can vie for an NFC wild card.

Harbaugh gives the Giants their biggest Super Bowl–winning coaching buzz since Tom Coughlin.

Fernando Mendoza

MIKE McDANIEL
LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

Jim Harbaugh and his new offensive coordinator, the former Dolphins coach, may seem like an odd fit, but the Chargers needed someone to make the running game more efficient and the passing game more explosive. Justin Herbert is out of excuses playing for his fifth and best OC in his seven NFL seasons.

McDaniel will also be a great influence on second-year running back Omarion Hampton and can better utilize the speed and quickness of Herbert's top three targets: Ladd McConkey, Quentin Johnston and Oronde Gadsden II.

KENNETH WALKER III
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Kansas City sorely needs more on the ground with Patrick Mahomes' status up in the air after major knee surgery. Enter the Super Bowl 60 MVP, who arrives from Seattle to give the Chiefs a top-end lead back. Between Walker and rookie Emmett Johnson, the Chiefs are serious about getting the running game on track.

The Chiefs have been pass-happy of late, but look for them to pound the ball more with Eric Bieniemy returning as offensive coordinator to influence Andy Reid's play-calling.

JAYLEN WADDLE
DENVER BRONCOS

Denver reached the brink of the Super Bowl with a healthy Bo Nix at quarterback. But the team also saw a need to round out the receiving corps with Jaylen Waddle, McDaniel's dynamo from Miami. Watch out for Waddle and rookie tight end Justin Joly to change the passing production more to Sean Payton's preference under new play-caller Davis Webb.

Geno Smith

Mike LaFleur

MIKE EVANS
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

Mike Evans was supposed to be a Buccaneer for life on his way to the Pro Football Hall of Fame as one of the most consistent big play and red zone receivers the league has ever seen. Instead, Evans joins the list of several post-prime receiving stars to bring their hearts to San Francisco late in a career. Brock Purdy should embrace Evans' home-run ability with his elite deep-throwing arm.

MIKE LAFLEUR AND JEREMIYAH LOVE
ARIZONA CARDINALS

Mike LaFleur leaves the shadow of Sean McVay and brother Matt in Green Bay, stepping into a brighter spotlight to lead a team that needs a lot of help in the desert. LaFleur's offense will be watered to life based on how much they feed rookie Jeremiyah Love in the revamped running game featuring free-agent addition Tyler Allgeier as a new 1-2 punch.

MALIK WILLIS AND KYLER MURRAY
MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Malik Willis and Kyler Murray were the most coveted free-agent quarterbacks. Willis followed former Packers defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley to lead the offense in Miami. Murray, cut by the Cards, shuffled off to Minnesota in a new deal, trying to help the Vikings recover from the J.J. McCarthy mess.

TRAVIS ETIENNE JR.
NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Saints are ready to march into playoff contention with Tyler Shough quarterbacking in the second season under offensive-minded coach Kellen Moore. Chris Olave and Alvin Kamara have help from rookie wide receiver Jordyn Tyson and Travis Etienne Jr. The former Jaguar gets closer to his hometown of Jennings, Louisiana, and New Orleans has a chance to field the most balanced and explosive offense in the NFC South.

GENO SMITH
NEW YORK JETS

The Jets, who took Smith in Round 2 of the 2013 NFL Draft, kept the bridge from burning down and got a much-improved version of the same passer 13 years later. Smith retakes a Jets offense reloaded with weapons, with the team using first-round picks on tight end Kenyon Sadiq and No. 2 wide receiver Omar Cooper Jr. to boost Garrett Wilson and returning Breece Hall.

ROBERT SALEH AND BRIAN DABOLL
TENNESSEE TITANS

The Titans kept their plans to rebuild the defense and lift the play of second-year QB Cam Ward with former Jets coach Robert Saleh taking over as head coach alongside former Giants coach Brian Daboll leading the offense. Tennessee spent well for Saleh to improve the D and reunited Wan'Dale Robinson with Daboll to give Ward a reliable slot. The Titans also smashed the draft, getting a No. 1 wideout in Carnell Tate.

Super Clock Is Ticking

Will next February mark the third straight year with a first-time Super Bowl–winning quarterback?

BY BILL BENDER

Sam Darnold led the Seattle Seahawks to a 29-13 victory against the New England Patriots in Super Bowl 60. Darnold, the No. 3 pick in the 2018 NFL Draft, became the first starting QB in that class to win a Super Bowl. Baker Mayfield, Josh Allen and Lamar Jackson—three QBs who were in that same draft—are among the QBs pushing into their 30s who are facing more pressure to win a Super Bowl in 2026. We sorted those QBs from oldest to youngest.

DAK PRESCOTT | COWBOYS |

2026 WEEK 1 AGE: 33
PLAYOFF RECORD: 2-5

> Prescott led the NFL in passing attempts in two of the last three seasons. The Cowboys ranked second in the NFL in total offense last season, and Prescott is not that far removed from a second-place finish in the AP NFL MVP voting in 2023. He has three years remaining on a $240 million contract—and Dallas upgraded its defense this offseason.

JOSH ALLEN | BILLS |

2026 WEEK 1 AGE: 30
PLAYOFF RECORD: 8-7

> Allen, the 2024 AP NFL MVP, has led Buffalo to double-digit wins and playoff appearances seven straight seasons. He had a career-best 69.3% completion percentage last season. A string of disappointing playoff losses, including two AFC championship appearances, led to the firing of Sean McDermott and the promotion of offensive coordinator Joe Brady. Allen faces the most pressure among this group as a result.

JARED GOFF | LIONS |

2026 WEEK 1 AGE: 31
PLAYOFF RECORD: 5-5

> Goff, the No. 1 pick in the 2016 NFL Draft, is working on four straight 4,000-yard seasons for the Lions. He played in Super Bowl 53 with the Rams and helped Detroit make the NFC championship game in 2023. Goff finished fifth in the AP NFL MVP voting in 2024. Detroit missed the playoffs last season, and the NFC North will be a tough proving ground again in 2026.

JOE BURROW | BENGALS |

2026 WEEK 1 AGE: 29
PLAYOFF RECORD: 5-2

> Burrow, who led Cincinnati to back-to-back AFC championship games and a Super Bowl appearance from 2021-22, missed 16 games over the last three seasons, with the Bengals failing to reach the playoffs all three years. Burrow still has 75 TDs and 20 interceptions in that stretch, and he is an MVP-caliber quarterback when healthy. Cincinnati's defense should improve with the acquisition of Dexter Lawrence.

BAKER MAYFIELD | BUCCANEERS |

2026 WEEK 1 AGE: 31
PLAYOFF RECORD: 2-3

> Mayfield is 27-24 with two playoff appearances the last three seasons in Tampa Bay, and the No. 1 pick in the 2018 NFL Draft is in the final year of his contract with the Buccaneers. Remarkably, Mayfield is on his fourth coordinator in four seasons with Tampa Bay. That relationship with Zac Robinson—a former Oklahoma State QB—comes into focus.

LAMAR JACKSON | RAVENS |

2026 WEEK 1 AGE: 29
PLAYOFF RECORD: 3-5

> Jackson, a two-time AP NFL MVP, begins a new chapter with first-year coach Jesse Minter. The Ravens missed the playoffs last season after reaching the AFC championship game in 2024. Jackson missed four games with a back injury. Jackson has maintained a passer rating higher than 100 each of the last three seasons, but he had less than 100 rushing attempts for the first time in his career in 2025.

Jaxson Dart

Breakout Breakdown

Catch these potential surprises in 2026

BY VINNIE IYER

SECOND-YEAR QBs FLEX FOR THEIR 2025 DRAFT CLASS

Cam Ward, Jaxson Dart and Tyler Shough can turn what was considered to be a weaker quarterback draft into a top set of young guns. Ward, with the Titans, and Dart, as a Giant, will benefit from more support with new coaches and personnel to prove they can be long-term franchise passers. Shough, meanwhile, landed in the right system under Kellen Moore, and the Saints upgraded their offensive skill players.

CALEB WILLIAMS FOR MVP

Cam Newton and Lamar Jackson did it. Baker Mayfield and Joe Burrow have been close. Jayden Daniels and Fernando Mendoza can do it. But in 2026, the Bears quarterback will become the latest Heisman Trophy–winning QB to also win an NFL regular-season MVP. Expect Williams to have a prolific passing season in year 2 of Ben Johnson's explosive offense in Chicago, making him a sneaky favorite for the league's biggest individual award. Williams would join Walter Payton as the only Bears to ever win NFL MVP.

ANDY REID REMINDS EVERYONE HE'S THE NFL'S BEST COACH

Bill Belichick is now far removed from the NFL. After lengthy tenures in the AFC North, Mike Tomlin and John Harbaugh relocated. That makes Reid the coach who has led his current team the longest—since 2013, or four years longer than either the Rams' Sean McVay or the 49ers' Kyle Shanahan. Reid, 68, will match his 14 years in Philadelphia with his 14th season in Kansas City. It's hard to believe he hasn't won Coach of the Year since 2002 with the Eagles. That changes when Reid leads the Chiefs' rebound back into the playoffs with the added challenge of a recovering Patrick Mahomes.

Andy Reid

JOE BURROW OWNS THE NFL COMEBACK PLAYER OF THE YEAR AWARD AGAIN

Burrow battled major injury adversity in the 2020 (torn ACL in knee) and 2023 (wrist surgery) seasons. He responded to each setback with special seasons when fully recovered in 2021 and 2024. Turf toe woes helped limit Burrow to only eight games in 2025, dooming the Bengals to a 3-8 start without him. Burrow is due for another big year in 2026, which should mean Cincinnati ends its three-year playoff drought.

BILLS OR RAVENS WILL WIN THE SUPER BOWL WITH A ROOKIE HEAD COACH

Buffalo and Baltimore made two of the boldest moves in the offseason, going from established winning coaches to two rising stars. The Bills replaced Sean McDermott by promoting offensive coordinator Joe Brady to become the league's youngest coach at 36. The Ravens parted ways with John Harbaugh in favor of 42-year-old Jesse Minter, the former Chargers and Michigan defensive coordinator under Jim Harbaugh. In a copycat league, following the Seahawks' blueprint with Mike Macdonald made a lot of sense to get either Josh Allen or Lamar Jackson a Super Bowl ring to go with MVP status.

Previews and Predictions

Loaded with Super Bowl contenders at the top of both conferences, the NFL has eight to 10 teams that have a chance to win it all

In the NFC, the Seahawks, Rams and 49ers can make it difficult on one another to come out of the West with another top playoff seed, while the Eagles will have their hands full in the East. That can set up the Bears to emerge out of a strong North to earn the critical No. 1 spot.

In the AFC, the Chiefs, Ravens and Patriots will all push the Bills, but this looks like the best shot for Buffalo to finally enjoy that long-awaited Super Bowl glory.

AFC

PREDICTED STANDINGS

AFC EAST

Buffalo Bills	12-5
New England Patriots	10-7
New York Jets	5-12
Miami Dolphins	2-15

AFC NORTH

Baltimore Ravens	11-6
Cincinnati Bengals	10-7
Pittsburgh Steelers	9-8
Cleveland Browns	3-14

AFC SOUTH

Jacksonville Jaguars	11-6
Houston Texans	9-8
Indianapolis Colts	7-10
Tennessee Titans	6-11

AFC WEST

Kansas City Chiefs	12-5
Denver Broncos	10-7
Los Angeles Chargers	8-9
Las Vegas Raiders	5-12

PLAYOFF SEEDS

1. Buffalo Bills
2. Kansas City Chiefs
3. Jacksonville Jaguars
4. Baltimore Ravens
5. New England Patriots
6. Denver Broncos
7. Cincinnati Bengals

NFC

PREDICTED STANDINGS

NFC EAST

Philadelphia Eagles	12-5
Dallas Cowboys	10-7
New York Giants	8-9
Washington Commanders	6-11

NFC NORTH

Chicago Bears	14-3
Detroit Lions	12-5
Green Bay Packers	11-6
Minnesota Vikings	7-10

NFC SOUTH

New Orleans Saints	8-9
Tampa Bay Buccaneers	6-11
Carolina Panthers	5-12
Atlanta Falcons	3-14

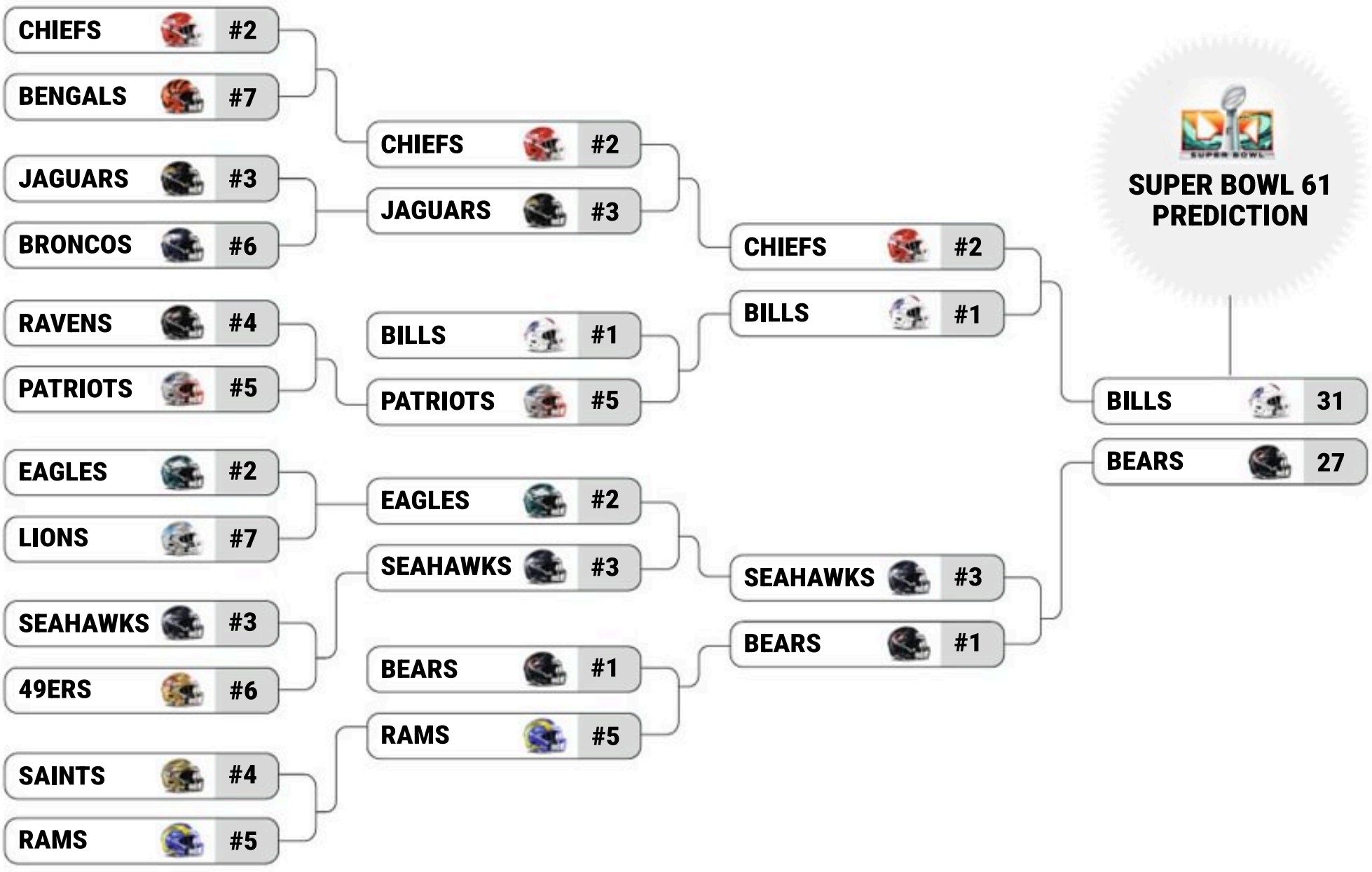
NFC WEST

Seattle Seahawks	12-5
Los Angeles Rams	12-5
San Francisco 49ers	12-5
Arizona Cardinals	4-13

PLAYOFF SEEDS

1. Chicago Bears
2. Philadelphia Eagles
3. Seattle Seahawks
4. New Orleans Saints
5. Los Angeles Rams
6. San Francisco 49ers
7. Detroit Lions

2026–27 PROJECTED PLAYOFF BRACKET



Buffalo Bills

In his nine years in Buffalo, Sean McDermott built the Bills into a perennial contender. He had them constantly on the doorstep of their first Super Bowl trip since their four straight Super Bowl losses in the early 1990s. But nine years on the doorstep was enough, which is why McDermott was fired and his offensive coordinator Joe Brady was given the reins, with the hopes that his chemistry with MVP-caliber quarterback Josh Allen will be enough to finally put Buffalo over the top. They wasted a golden opportunity last season with the Kansas City Chiefs not in the playoffs, only to lose 33-30 to the Denver Broncos in the divisional round.

What will be different this season? Maybe nothing, since the Bills only made a few offseason tweaks to their roster. Maybe everything, if Brady has the magic formula that McDermott couldn't find. One thing is certain, though: The Bills are still good enough to be in the hunt, as long as Allen stays healthy. Whether they can actually reach that Super Bowl will depend on whether Brady can push the buttons in the playoffs that McDermott failed to locate.

RUNNING GAME

One big reason why the Bills didn't want to go outside the organization for McDermott's replacement is that the offense works. In particular, the running game works amazingly well. It was the best running attack in the league last season, averaging 159.6 yards per game. And yes, Allen is a huge part of that. He ran 112 times for 579 yards and 14 touchdowns. The 6-foot-5, 237-pounder remains one of the best running quarterbacks in the game, due to his elusiveness, his deceptive speed, and the difficulty defenders have in dragging his huge body down.

But the best part about the Bills' ground game was the emergence of James Cook as one of the best running backs in the NFL. He's coming off a spectacular season, leading the league with 1,621 rushing yards and 12 touchdowns. He has proven to be a tough inside runner and a real danger once he gets through the line of scrimmage because of his burst and his breakaway speed.

They have formed an impressive, 1-2 punch out of the backfield that makes it tough for opposing defenses to commit to the pass rush against them. Allen and Cook, of course, owe a debt to one of the best offensive lines in the NFL. And the good news for them is that four of their five starters will return for 2026. Their one loss was left guard David Edwards, and it'll be an open competition to replace him this summer. But the Bills are convinced their line won't take much of a hit at all.

If there's one problem with the Bills' rushing attack it's that it's thin. Ty Johnson and Ray Davis are decent, short-term replacements for Cook, and can give him a series or two per game if he needs it. But they combined for 475 yards last season. They don't offer the same strength or explosiveness at all. But as long as Cook is healthy, expect the Bills to do what they've always done—pound the ball relentlessly on the ground to keep the defenses off balance, which will give Allen plenty of room to operate when he decides to pass. It's effective, especially in cold weather, which comes pretty early in the season in Western New York.

PASSING GAME

It's the same old story for the Bills. They have one of the best quarterbacks in the game, certainly the one with the strongest arm. He puts up MVP-like numbers almost every season and can do wondrous things with his throws from the pocket or on the run. They get by with the receivers they have around him, too. But there is always a sense that they could do better. At least that's the sense from the outside. And finally, it looks like GM Brandon Beane agrees.

So his biggest offseason move was to acquire receiver DJ Moore from the Chicago Bears. Never mind the high price—a second-round pick for a player the Bears might have been releasing anyway. The reason they did that is that the 29-year-old Moore is the best receiver they've had since Stefon Diggs. His production dipped last season—50 catches for 682 yards and six touchdowns. But he caught 98 passes in 2024, and had 1,364 yards the year before that.

Just the threat of that kind of production that otherwise relies on the underwhelming trio of Khalil Shakir (72-719-4), Keon Coleman (38-404-4) and Josh Palmer (22-303). All of them are decent No. 2 receivers at best. None of them are breakaway threats or difference-makers on offense. Moore changes that calculus a bit. And he could take some of the pressure off the Bills' tight end duo of Dawson Knox (36-417-4) and Pro Bowler Dalton Kincaid (39-57-1-5). Those are all nice weapons to have, and the twin tight ends are particularly

Josh Allen

by David Schoenholt

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Houston Texans	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 17	DETROIT LIONS	8:15 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 12	at Los Angeles Rams	8:15 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:25 p.m.
7		BYE WEEK	
8	Nov. 1	BALTIMORE RAVENS	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 9	at Minnesota Vikings	8:15 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	MIAMI DOLPHINS	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 26	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	8:20 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at New England Patriots	4:25 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Green Bay Packers	8:20 p.m.
15	Dec. 19	CHICAGO BEARS	8:20 p.m.
16	Dec. 25	at Denver Broncos	4:30 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	at Miami Dolphins	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	NEW YORK JETS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Josh Allen	Kyle Allen
RB	James Cook III	Ray Davis
WR	DJ Moore	Keon Coleman
WR	Khalil Shakir	Skyler Bell
WR	Joshua Palmer	Tyrell Shavers
TE	Dalton Kincaid	Dawson Knox
LT	Dion Dawkins	Jude Bowry
LG	Alec Anderson	Austin Corbett
C	Connor McGovern	Lloyd Cushenberry III
RG	O'Cyrus Torrence	Nick Broeker
RT	Spencer Brown	Travis Clayton

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	T.J. Sanders	Phidarian Mathis
NT	Deone Walker	-
RDE	Ed Oliver	DeWayne Carter
WLB	Greg Rousseau	Michael Hoecht
LILB	Dorian Williams	Joe Andreessen
RILB	Terrel Bernard	Kaleb Elarms-Orr
SLB	Bradley Chubb	T.J. Parker
LCB	Christian Benford	Toriano Pride Jr.
SS	Cole Bishop	Jalon Kilgore
FS	C.J. Gardner-Johnson	Geno Stone
RCB	Maxwell Hairston	Davison Igbinosun

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Tyler Bass	Mitch Wishnowsky

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	35	DE	T. J. Parker
2	62	CB	Davison Igbinosun
4	102	T	Jude Bowry
4	125	WR	Skyler Bell
4	126	LB	Kaleb Elarms-Orr

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	30	CB	Maxwell Hairston
2	41	DT	T. J. Sanders
3	72	DE	Landon Jackson
4	109	DT	Deone Walker
5	170	CB	Jordan Hancock

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	33	WR	Keon Coleman
2	60	S	Cole Bishop
3	95	DT	DeWayne Carter
4	128	RB	Ray Davis
5	141	C	Sedrick Van Pran-Granger

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	25	TE	Dalton Kincaid
2	59	G	O'Cyrus Torrence
3	91	LB	Dorian Williams
5	150	WR	Justin Shorter
7	230	OG	Nick Broeker

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	23	CB	Kaiir Elam
2	63	RB	James Cook
3	89	LB	Terrel Bernard
5	148	WR	Khalil Shakir
6	180	P	Matt Araiza

T.J. Sanders

effective in the red zone. But Moore gives Allen at least one receiver capable of benefiting from his magical right arm.

If Moore is still a No. 1–caliber receiver, the Bills' offense could be enough to put the team back over the top and once again make them the class of the AFC. They have a big and talented offensive line that will give Allen plenty of time to operate in the pocket. And when they can't, he's as good as there is at making plays in the passing game while on the run. While doing that, he's made a group of average receivers turn into better-than-average players, and contribute to an offense that despite its shortcomings in the passing game finished ranked fourth overall in the league. Brady, their new head coach and former offensive coordinator, wants to put the juice back in that passing attack.

He recognizes that the best part about this team is Allen, not the running game. When you have a quarterback like that, you have to use him. And you have to put the best possible pieces around him to make it all work. To be fair, they probably need more than just Moore. A strong No. 2 receiver would help, and reduce all the others to the depth pieces that they probably are. But as is, the Bills are positioned to do much better than the 216.6 passing yards per game they averaged in 2025.

Because they really do have most of the pieces—the quarterback, two tight ends, and even Cook is good enough to contribute out of the backfield (33 catches, 291 yards, two touchdowns last year). But they haven't had that true No. 1 since Diggs had 107 catches, 1,183 yards and eight touchdowns in 2023. The Bills' passing game ranked eighth in the NFL that season. Moore will help them get closer to that. And hopefully he's just the start of the Bills realizing that their priority should be surrounding their 30-year-old quarterback with the best weapons they can find. Otherwise they risk wasting far too much of his prime.

RUN DEFENSE

The Bills weren't bounced from the playoffs in the divisional round because of their run defense, but all season long that was still their fatal flaw. A team with Super Bowl dreams can't survive with the fourth-worst rushing defense in the league, giving up 136.2 yards per game on the ground and a startling 5.1 yards per carry. Eight times, in fact, in their 19 games they gave up more than 150 yards on the ground.

Now, a lot of that can be attributed to the fact that their best defensive tackle, Ed Oliver, was limited by injuries to just three regular season games before returning to play just 16 snaps in the Bills' playoff loss. And linebacker Matt Milano battled injuries most of the season, too. But it's also a sign of how their other starter, 331-pound rookie Deone Walker, struggled stopping the run, and how little depth they had behind him and Oliver in the middle of their defensive line. Overall, the line is small-ish and it showed. They had the speed to rush the passer, but could be out-muscled on the run.

Most alarmingly, it's not an area that was addressed in the offseason. They added edge rusher Bradley Chubb, but he's never been a top run defender. So expect this to remain a problem area for the Bills, especially late in the year.

PASS DEFENSE

Statistically, the Bills had the NFL's best passing defense last season, which is remarkable considering they were in the bottom third of the NFL with just 36 sacks. They had a maddeningly inconsistent and often weak pass rush, with no edge rusher that teams truly feared. Nobody had more than the seven sacks they got from Gregory Rousseau.

That's why their biggest off-season acquisition on defense was an edge rusher in Chubb, who came from the Dolphins. He's 30 and his production has been inconsistent over the years, but he had 8 ½ sacks last season in Miami, reestablishing himself as a force in his first year after tearing his ACL. Age-wise and health-wise, Chubb is a risk. But it's one they needed to take. The fact that they were so successful against the pass last season without much of a pass rush is attributable to two things—the fact that most teams preferred to run against their weak run defense, and the strength of

their secondary. But new defensive coordinator Jim Leonhard has some work to do there, too, with a bunch of new faces.

Tre'Davious White is gone, though the Bills did sign veteran Dee Alford to help out the promising duo of Christian Benford and Maxwell Hairston at corner. And veteran C.J. Gardner-Johnson was added to play safety next to Cole Bishop. Gardner-Johnson is 28 and has battled injuries as he's been kicked around to four teams in the last three seasons. But when he's healthy and motivated, he has a knack for bringing an edge to whatever secondary he's in. He also had six interceptions with the Eagles in both 2022 and 2024, which wasn't that long ago—proof that in the right defense, when he's happy, he can make a lot of things happen. The Bills are hoping he'll do that for them, too.

Cole Bishop

SPECIAL TEAMS

How can you go wrong with a punter nicknamed "The Boomin' Onion"? The Bills don't think you can, which is why they're bringing back Mitch Wishnowsky, although they did draft punter Tommy Doman Jr. in the seventh round for competition. And he's still paired with their incredibly reliable kicker, Tyler Bass, who has converted 84.5 percent of his field goals in his five-year career. That number has dipped to 82.8 percent over the last two seasons, but he's also eight for 10 on kicks of 50 yards or longer, and now has plenty of experience in the Western New York winters filled with cold, snow and wind.

BOTTOM LINE

They fired McDermott because he couldn't get them over the hump and into the Super Bowl, so it's clear what Brady's marching orders are. This is a team that expects to be in Super Bowl 61 and certainly has the talent to get there, as long as Allen is healthy. They have holes, like at receiver and along their defensive line, but overall they're as talented as any team in the AFC. They will win 10-plus games, maybe a division title, and make the playoffs. What happens after that depends on their health, and whether their postseason luck finally breaks their way.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Joe Brady
Former Bills offensive coordinator, 2024–25
Senior assistant coach: John Fox
Offensive coordinator: Pete Carmichael
Defensive coordinator: Jim Leonhard
Special teams coordinator: Jeff Rodgers

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Bo Hardegree
Assistant quarterbacks: Kyle Shurmur
Running backs: Kelly Skipper
Wide receivers: Drew Terrell
Assistant wide receivers: DJ Mangas
Run game coordinator/tight ends: Rob Boras
Offensive line: Pat Meyer
Assistant offensive line: Austin Gund
Pass game specialist/game management: Marc Lubick

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Terrance Jamison
Inside linebackers: John Egorugwu
Outside linebackers: Bobby April III
Secondary: Joe Danna
Cornerbacks: Jay Valai
Senior defensive assistant: Jason Rebrovich
Defensive assistant: Alvin Vaughn
Defensive quality control: Craig Robertson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	13–6	68.4%	4–2	7–2	6–4
2024–25	15–5	75.0%	5–1	10–0	5–5
2023–24	12–7	63.2%	4–2	8–2	4–4
2022–23	14–4	77.8%	5–2	7–2	6–2
2021–22	12–7	63.2%	6–1	7–3	5–4
2020–21	15–4	79.0%	6–0	9–1	5–3
2019–20	10–7	58.8%	3–3	4–4	6–3
2018–19	6–10	37.5%	2–4	4–4	2–6
2017–18	9–8	52.9%	3–3	6–2	3–6
2016–17	7–9	43.8%	1–5	4–4	3–5
2015–16	8–8	50.0%	4–2	5–3	3–4
2014–15	9–7	56.3%	4–2	4–3	4–4
2013–14	6–10	37.5%	3–3	4–4	2–6
2012–13	6–10	37.5%	2–4	4–4	2–6
2011–12	6–10	37.5%	1–5	5–3	1–7
2010–11	4–12	25.0%	1–5	2–5	2–6
2009–10	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–4	3–5
2008–09	7–9	43.8%	0–6	3–5	4–4
2007–08	7–9	43.8%	4–2	4–4	3–5
2006–07	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5

De'Von Achane

Miami Dolphins

The Dolphins were a hard franchise to figure out last year. They started 1-6, and it seemed like a lock that they'd fire head coach Mike McDaniel. Then they won five of six and it looked like McDaniel would be part of their future. Then they lost three of their last four games, and now they've got a new GM, a new head coach, and were willing to absorb a $99 million "dead cap" hit to get rid of quarterback Tua Tagovailoa.

So yeah, they're starting over with new GM Jon-Eric Sullivan, new coach Jeff Hafley, and new quarterback Malik Willis—all of whom came over from the Green Bay Packers. They are looking at a multi-year rebuilding project, depending on how well Willis works out. And if this season falls apart quickly, a renewed firesale could be on. Don't bet against the fire-sale, by the way. Along with Tagovailoa they also traded their No. 1 receiver, Jaylen Waddle, and weren't exactly big spenders in free agency to replace any of the players they lost. The Dolphins haven't won a playoff game in 26 seasons. It's pretty unlikely that streak will be snapped any time soon.

RUNNING GAME

If the Dolphins have one thing going for them—and really, it might be only one—it's the presence of running back De'Von Achane. The 5-foot-9, 191-pounder made it clear he's one of the NFL's backs with his performance last season. He ran for 1,350 yards and eight touchdowns on an NFL-best 5.7 yards per rush. And he added to his value by catching 67 passes for 488 yards and four touchdowns, too. The problem is that's a lot of work for a small-ish body. Ideally, they wouldn't burden one back with 305 touches. They're lucky he's held up as well as he has. Maybe the new regime will get more work for Jaylen Wright, who had 70 carries for 88 yards in 10 games last season. But the Dolphins didn't go out and add a second back for a 1-2 backfield punch. They appear willing to ride Achane as far as he'll take them. And with a very untested quarterback, they might have to ride him a lot.

There is hope that Miami's offensive line will be better than last season. The Dolphins have an outstanding young center in Aaron Brewer, and they signed former Chargers lineman Jamaree Salyer to start at one of the guard spots. The hope is that rookie Kadyn Proctor, the 12th overall pick in April's draft who played tackle at Alabama, will claim the other starting guard spot. While Patrick Paul is a promising young tackle on the left side, the starting right tackle will be 2020 first-round pick Austin Jackson.

Of course, Willis can run from the quarterback position, which will bring an element to the Miami offense that Tagovailoa never really brought. Willis ran 42 times for 261 yards and three touchdowns in very limited action over the last two years. But maybe just that ability will be enough to take some pressure off both Achane and the offensive line. Mostly, though, the running game is all about Achane, who has shown a surprising toughness to go with his breakaway speed. He probably is not enough to carry the Dolphins to contention all by himself, though it's possible he may have to try.

PASSING GAME

The biggest decision of the offseason for the Dolphins wasn't the hiring of a new GM and coach. It was their willingness to take the enormous cap hit to get rid of the erratic and oft-injured Tagovailoa. And once they decided to do that it left them in a precarious position. There weren't a lot of great quarterbacks on the free agent market. They wanted one they could build around if necessary, but also one they could quickly discard if they decided they were better off quarterback hunting in the 2027 draft. That led them to the 27-year-old Willis, a former third-round pick of the Tennessee Titans (2022), who seemed to find himself as an NFL quarterback the last two years backing up Jordan Love in Green Bay. Over his two seasons there he completed an impressive 78.7 percent of his passes for 972 yards with six touchdowns and no interceptions. He ran for 261 yards and three touchdowns, too.

What he showed in those games, particularly in his three starts, was competence, and nothing more. But in a strange free agent market, filled mostly with battered veterans, Willis was the only young quarterback available with an obvious upside. And no one knew that better than Sullivan, the former Packers GM, and Hafley, the former Packers defensive coordinator, who wanted to give Willis a shot in Miami. But then they welcomed him by trading away his No. 1 receiver in Waddle. That left him with … well, not a lot. Achane was the No. 2 receiver last year, followed by tight end Greg Dulcich (26-335-1). The best returning receiver is Malik Washington, who averaged just 6.9 yards per catch (46-317-3).

The Dolphins did dip their toe into free agency to help him out, but they didn't exactly make a splash. They signed Tutu Atwell, the former Ram, who had 42 catches for 562 yards in 2024 before battling a hamstring injury most of last season. And they added Jalen Tolbert, the former Cowboy, who also peaked

by David Schoenholt

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at San Francisco 49ers	4:25 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Minnesota Vikings	4:05 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	CINCINNATI BENGALS	1:00 p.m.
6		BYE WEEK	
7	Oct. 25	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	4:25 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	DETROIT LIONS	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Indianapolis Colts	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Buffalo Bills	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	NEW YORK JETS	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Denver Broncos	4:05 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	CHICAGO BEARS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Green Bay Packers	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	1:00 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	BUFFALO BILLS	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at New England Patriots	TBD

Malik Washington

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Malik Willis	Quinn Ewers
RB	De'Von Achane	Jaylen Wright
WR	Malik Washington	Chris Bell
WR	Jalen Tolbert	Tutu Atwell
WR	Caleb Douglas	Kevin Coleman Jr.
TE	Greg Dulcich	Will Kacmarek
LT	Patrick Paul	Braeden Daniels
LG	Jonah Savaiinaea	Josh Priebe
C	Aaron Brewer	Andrew Meyer
RG	Kadyn Proctor	Jamaree Salyer
RT	Austin Jackson	Charlie Heck

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Chop Robinson	Robert Beal Jr.
LDT	Jordan Phillips	Kenneth Grant
RDT	Zach Sieler	Matthew Butler
RDE	Joshua Uche	David Ojabo
WLB	Jordyn Brooks	Jacob Rodriguez
MLB	Tyrel Dodson	Ronnie Harrison Jr.
SLB	Willie Gay Jr.	Trey Moore
LCB	Chris Johnson	Darrell Baker Jr.
SS	Dante Trader Jr.	Isaiah Johnson
FS	Lonnie Johnson Jr.	Zayne Anderson
RCB	Storm Duck	JuJu Brents

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Riley Patterson	Bradley Pinion

Zach Sieler

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	12	T	Kadyn Proctor
1	27	CB	Chris Johnson
2	43	LB	Jacob Rodriguez
3	75	WR	Caleb Douglas
3	87	TE	Will Kacmarek

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	13	DT	Kenneth Grant
2	37	OG	Jonah Savaiinaea
5	143	DT	Jordan Phillips
5	150	CB	Jason Marshall Jr.
5	155	S	Dante Trader

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	21	EDGE	Chop Robinson
2	55	OT	Patrick Paul
4	120	RB	Jaylen Wright
5	158	EDGE	Mohamed Kamara
6	184	WR	Malik Washington

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	51	CB	Cam Smith
3	84	RB	Devon Achane
6	197	WR	Elijah Higgins
7	238	OT	Ryan Hayes
[Miami selected only four players in the 2023 NFL Draft.]			

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
3	102	LB	Channing Tindall
4	125	WR	Erik Ezukanma
7	224	LB	Cameron Goode
7	247	QB	Skylar Thompson
[Miami selected only four players in the 2022 NFL Draft.]			

in 2024 with 49 catches for 610 yards. Miami spent two third-round picks on wide receivers—Caleb Douglas out of Texas Tech and Chris Bell out of Louisville. So Willis will go into battle with essentially five No. 3 receivers at his side, along with a non-elite tight end and a running back who may end up leading the team in receptions in 2026.

That's not exactly a formula for success, which is something new offensive coordinator Bobby Slowik is going to have to figure out. Even if Willis is everything the Dolphins hope he will be, the weapons just aren't there around him. And that could mean a really heavy workload for Achane, even in the passing game. It's the odd team where keeping the running back healthy might be even more important than protecting the quarterback.

Willis can change all that, of course, by showing that the strong arm he showed in Green Bay—his ability to create outside the pocket can turn his middling weapons into decent ones. But that's a lot to ask of a player whose final start with the Packers, when he threw for 288 yards and a touchdown in a Week 17 loss to the Ravens, was the only time he threw for more than 202 yards in a game in his NFL career. But maybe Sullivan and Hafley know something the rest of the NFL doesn't. If not, it doesn't really bode well for the Miami passing attack. And Willis may be facing an uphill battle to keep his job beyond the 2026 season.

RUN DEFENSE

One thing Hafley has made clear since he took over the Dolphins is that he wants to beef up the defensive line. The Dolphins were terrible against the run last season, ranking 26th in the league, giving up 132.4 rushing yards per game. It wasn't all because of the defensive line, but they deserve a lot of the blame. The problem is that Hafley didn't add a lot to it. They have one good player in Kenneth Grant, a 6-foot-4, 335-pound nose tackle. But they are not overloaded with talent around him. Zach Sieler is a serviceable veteran, but Chop Robinson isn't much of a run-stopper on the edge. They brought in Josh Uche to be part of their line rotation, but he's made just four starts in his six NFL years.

The best player he has to spark his run defense is middle linebacker Jordyn Brooks. He was an All-Pro last season when he led the NFL with 183 tackles, including 13 tackles for loss. It sure would help, though, if the defensive line could stop some of those runners from getting through and ease the burden on Brooks' shoulders. Maybe new defensive coordinator Sean Duggan can find a scheme that helps them do that, too.

PASS DEFENSE

The passing defense was actually stronger than the run defense last season, at least statistically. The problem for Hafley, though, is he lost a lot of key players from that unit during the offseason. Cornerback Rasul Douglas is gone after being the only Miami player with two interceptions. Also gone are starting safeties Minkah Fitzpatrick and Ashtyn Davis. And maybe most importantly, edge rusher Bradley Chubb signed with Buffalo after leading Miami with 8.5 sacks.

The secondary replacements were underwhelming. They signed cornerback Darrell Baker, who started 19 games over the last two seasons with the Tennessee Titans and is still looking for his first career interception. And they added safety Lonnie Johnson, a seven-year journeyman who has 22 career starts and four interceptions in his career. The fact that those two will likely be starting says a lot about the state of the secondary.

The biggest question is where that pass rush will be coming from. The Dolphins' 39 sacks last season had them tied for 15th in the NFL, but Chubb had more than 21 percent of them. Maybe they'll get help from Uche, but that seems to be a lot to count on. He's only 27, and he once had 11.5 sacks in a reserve role with the New England Patriots. But that was four years and three teams ago and he's only had eight sacks since.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Dolphins parted ways with reliable veteran kicker Jason Sanders, but they seemed to have a ready replacement after Riley Patterson filled in for him when he missed all of 2025 with a hip injury. Patterson made 93.1 percent of his field goals (27 of 29). As a thank you, they signed the well-travelled Zane Gonzalez to compete with him in camp. Veteran Bradley Pinion should have a clearer path to the starting punter job.

BOTTOM LINE

If Willis can blossom into a franchise quarterback, this could be the beginning of better days for the Miami Dolphins. But considering the team they surrounded him with, this feels more like a time-killing season until they can start doing the real offseason work in 2027. It would be a huge lift for this team to even equal last year's 7-10 record. Unfortunately for them, they might not have hit rock bottom yet.

Jordyn Brooks

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Jeff Hafley
Former Packers defensive coordinator, 2024–25
Former Boston College head coach, 2020–23
Offensive coordinator: Bobby Slowik
Defensive coordinator: Sean Duggan
Special teams coordinator: Chris Tabor

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Passing Game Coordinator: Kevin Patullo
Quarterbacks: Bush Hamdan
Running Backs: Ladell Betts
Wide Receivers: Tyke Tolbert
Assistant Wide Receivers: Jonathan Krause
Tight Ends: Ron Middleton
Assistant Tight Ends: Lemuel Jeanpierre
Offensive Line: Zach Yenser
Assistant Offensive Line: Matt Applebaum

DEFENSE

Defensive Line: Austin Clark
Assistant Defensive Line: Chuka Ndulue
Linebackers: Al Washington
Assistant Linebackers: Wendel Davis
Defensive Backs/Pass Game Coordinator: Ryan Downard
Defensive Backs/Cornerbacks: Jahmile Addae
Assistant Defensive Backs/Nickels: DeShawn Shead
Run Game Coordinator: Joe Barry
Defensive Quality Control: Siriki Diabate

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	7–10	41.2%	3–3	4–4	2–6
2024–25	8–9	47.1%	3–3	5–3	3–6
2023–24	11–7	61.1%	4–2	7–2	4–4
2022–23	9–9	50.0%	3–4	6–2	3–7
2021–22	9–8	52.9%	4–2	6–3	3–4
2020–21	10–6	62.5%	3–3	5–3	5–3
2019–20	5–11	31.3%	2–4	3–5	2–6
2018–19	7–9	43.8%	4–2	6–2	1–7
2017–18	6–10	37.5%	2–4	4–3	2–6
2016–17	10–7	58.8%	4–2	6–2	4–5
2015–16	6–10	37.5%	1–5	3–4	3–5
2014–15	8–8	50.0%	3–3	4–4	3–4
2013–14	8–8	50.0%	2–4	4–4	4–4
2012–13	7–9	43.8%	2–4	5–3	2–6
2011–12	6–10	37.5%	3–3	4–4	2–6
2010–11	7–9	43.8%	2–4	1–7	6–2
2009–10	7–9	43.8%	4–2	4–4	3–5
2008–09	11–6	64.7%	4–2	5–4	6–2
2007–08	1–15	6.3%	0–6	1–6	0–8
2006–07	6–10	37.5%	1–5	4–4	2–6

New England Patriots

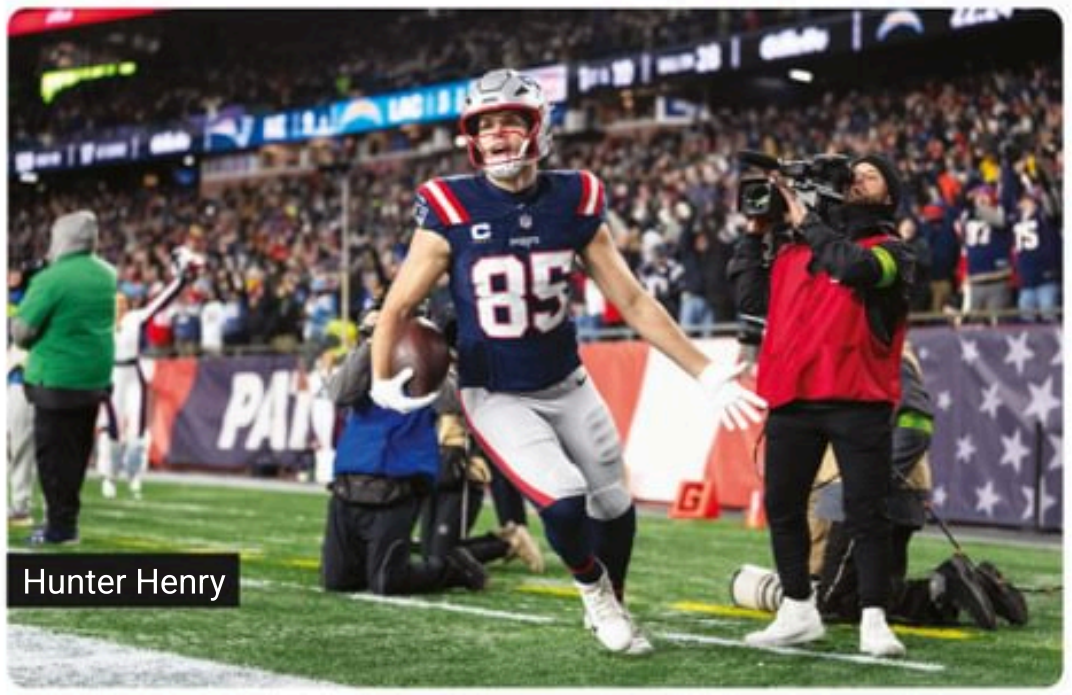
It's hard to imagine a team kicking off a whole new era any better than the Patriots did last year. In their first season under new head coach Mike Vrabel and their second with young, franchise quarterback Drake Maye, they turned what was a 4-13 team the year before into a 14-3 powerhouse. They made the playoffs for the first time in four years. They won their first division title in six years. And they reached the Super Bowl for the first time since Bill Belichick and Tom Brady led them there at the end of the 2018 season.

The people of New England would like to believe this is the start of Dynasty II. But before Vrabel and Maye get sized up for statues, there are a few issues they have to address. The biggest is that last year they succeeded against a pillowy soft schedule, with just four games against teams that went to the playoffs—and one in the last 13 weeks. Even their playoff run was soft, including an AFC championship game in Denver against a Broncos team that was without its starting quarterback. Roads rarely get cleared like that. So this season is about proving they're far more than a product of an easy schedule. They need to show that with Vrabel and Maye they're primed to be a contender for years to come.

RUNNING GAME

This was unsurprising, given Vrabel's coaching history, but the Patriots became a punishing rushing team in his first season. They averaged 128.9 yards per game on the ground, which was the sixth best total in the NFL. Yes, it helped that Maye, their 6-foot-4, 225-pound quarterback, can still make good use of his young legs. He ran for 450 yards and four touchdowns last year. But it's their 1-2 punch in the backfield that really made the difference. They started the season relying on Rhamondre Stevenson, but when he hurt his toe, rookie Treyveon Henderson took over. And eventually they split the

Drake Maye


Hunter Henry

by David Schoenholt

job, combining for more than 1,500 yards.

Entering 2026, expect more of the same. Henderson, who ran for 911 yards and nine touchdowns, is probably the lead back. Stevenson was the starter when healthy, but saw his role reduced. But he still finished with 603 yards and seven touchdowns in 14 games. Offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels' desire—or perhaps need—to rely on them was made obvious by two of the Patriots' offeseason pickups. They signed guard Alijah Vera-Tucker to give their line a boost. And they added fullback Reggie Gilliam to add a little punch in front of the backs.

What they'll need most, though, is improved play from their offensive line, which struggled at times last season, especially against better competition. Granted, they had more issues in pass protection than run blocking, but the run blocking wasn't always great either. Hence the addition of Vera-Tucker, who can be a true road grader when he's healthy enough to play. If they get that, the rushing attack can continue to be their engine, even as they are likely to lean more and more on Maye as he gets more comfortable in the NFL. But these aren't the old Patriots yet, and they may never will be. McDaniels isn't likely to trust Maye the way he once did his old Hall of Fame quarterback. He needs to establish the run to help Maye out, more than he ever had to do during the Brady years. With the Stevenson-Henderson punch, there's no reason they can't continue to do that. They'll face tougher schedules and better defenses this season. But for the most part, the production should still be there.

PASSING GAME

There might be more exciting and dynamic young quarterbacks in the NFL, like maybe Caleb Williams and Jayden Daniels. But there isn't a better one than the 23-year-old Maye, the third overall pick of the 2024 NFL Draft. There were some pretty high expectations for him coming out of North Carolina. But he exceeded those in his first two years in the NFL. And last year, in his first season with Vrabel and McDaniels, Maye was simply outstanding. He completed an NFL-best 72 percent of his passes for 4,394 yards, 31 touchdowns and eight interceptions. He led the NFL with 8.9 yards per pass attempt and had a league-high passer rating of 113.5.

He nearly won the NFL's MVP award, too, finishing one first-place vote (and five points) behind the winner, Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford, in the closest balloting in 22 years. All that was even better considering his receiving corps was really underwhelming. Stefon Diggs was a nice addition and had 82 catches for 1,014 yards and four touchdowns, but not enough of an impact for the Patriots to bring him back at age 32. His most reliable target was probably tight end Hunter Henry, but his 60 catches, 768 yards and seven touchdowns were hardly elite numbers as far as tight ends go.

The Patriots clearly knew they needed an upgrade, which is why they signed Romeo Doubs. The former Packers wideout who caught 55 passes for 724 yards and six touchdowns in a crowded Green Bay receiving corps in

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 9	at Seattle Seahawks	8:20 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Jacksonville Jaguars	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Buffalo Bills	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	NEW YORK JETS	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 22	at Chicago Bears	8:15 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Miami Dolphins	4:25 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	GREEN BAY PACKERS	4:25 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	vs. Detroit Lions (in Munich)	9:30 a.m.
11		BYE WEEK	
12	Nov. 29	at Los Angeles Chargers	8:20 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	BUFFALO BILLS	4:25 p.m.
14	Dec. 10	MINNESOTA VIKINGS	8:15 p.m.
15	Dec. 21	at Kansas City Chiefs	8:15 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
17	TBD	DENVER BRONCOS	TBD
18	TBD	MIAMI DOLPHINS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Drake Maye	Tommy DeVito
RB	Rhamondre Stevenson	TreVeyon Henderson
WR	Romeo Doubs	DeMario Douglas
WR	Kayshon Boutte	Kyle Williams
WR	Mack Hollins	Efton Chism III
TE	Hunter Henry	Julian Hill
LT	Will Campbell	James Hudson III
LG	Alijah Vera-Tucker	Caedan Wallace
C	Jared Wilson	Ben Brown
RG	Mike Onwenu	Andrew Rupcich
RT	Morgan Moses	Caleb Lomu

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Christian Barmore	Leonard Taylor III
NT	Joshua Farmer	Eric Gregory
RDE	Milton Williams	Cory Durden
WLB	Harold Landry III	Gabe Jacas
LILB	Christian Elliss	Namdi Obiazor
RILB	Robert Spillane	K.J. Britt
SLB	Dre'Mont Jones	Elijah Ponder
LCB	Carlton Davis III	Kindle Vildor
SS	Craig Woodson	Brenden Schooler
FS	Kevin Byard	Mike Brown
RCB	Christian Gonzalez	Charles Woods

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Andy Borregales	Bryce Baringer

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	28	T	Caleb Lomu
2	55	DE	Gabe Jacas
3	95	TE	Eli Raridon
5	171	CB	Karon Prunty
6	196	T	Dametrious Crownover

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	4	OT	Will Campbell
2	38	RB	TreVeyon Henderson
3	69	WR	Kyle Williams
3	95	C	Jared Wilson
4	106	S	Craig Woodson

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	3	QB	Drake Maye
2	37	WR	Ja'Lynn Polk
3	68	OT	Caeden Wallace
4	103	G	Layden Robinson
4	110	WR	Javon Baker

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	17	DB	Christian Gonzalez
2	46	EDGE	Keion White
3	76	S	Marte Mapu
4	107	C	Jake Andrews
4	112	K	Chad Ryland

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	29	OG	Cole Strange
2	50	WR	Tyquan Thornton
3	85	CB	Marcus Jones
4	121	DB	Jack Jones
4	127	RB	Pierre Strong Jr.

Craig Woodson

2025, will make the Patriots' passing game better. When we went to press, the expectation was that New England was on track to acquire Eagles receiver A.J. Brown on or after June 1.

The key to all this working as well as it did last season is the offensive line, which … well, when it comes to pass blocking it wasn't good. Maye was sacked 47 times during the regular season, the fourth highest total in the league. And he was just brutalized in the postseason, getting sacked 21 times in four games, including six times in the Super Bowl loss. Maye held up remarkably well while taking a beating, but history suggests that can't last. He is the Patriots' most precious asset and their ticket to future contention. They know they have to keep him upright and healthy, which is why New England used its first-round draft pick on Utah offensive tackle Caleb Lomu. If the Patriots can give Maye time to operate too, the passing offense has a chance to be great.

But it certainly will help if Brown arrives to step into that No. 1 role to at least replicate the kind of production Diggs delivered last year. Doubs is a reliable receiver who certainly could approach those numbers if he's thrown to more often. They could probably get more production out of Kayshon Boutte too. He had 33 catches for 551 yards and six touchdowns last season. But he was primarily a downfield threat, as his 16.7 yards per catch suggests. The other candidates, like slot receiver Demario Douglas (31-447-3) and 6-4 journeyman Mack Hollins (46-550-2) are probably more suited to a reserve role.

RUN DEFENSE

The Vrabel era established something important and unsurprising right from the outset: They weren't going to allow teams to run on their defense. They proved that by not allowing a single rusher to top 50 yards against them in any of the first nine games. Their rushing defense ranked sixth overall in the regular season, giving up a paltry 101.7 yards per game on the ground. They gave up only 11 rushing touchdowns all season long. And in their run to the Super Bowl they gave up only 3.1 yards per rush. A lot of that had to do with an elite defensive line duo of Christian Barmore and Milton Williams, who formed a 600-pound brick wall for opposing runners. They're back again and there's no reason to think they won't be just as dominant up front.

Since this is a Vrabel team, though, the run defense goes deeper than that. His linebacking corps is vastly underrated, with Christian Elliss and Robert Spillane. Their tackling was mostly outstanding throughout the season. In fact, 11 times in their 21 overall games they held opposing teams to under 100 rushing yards. With most of the personnel returning, and with Vrabel's emphasis still the same, expect that run dominance to continue in 2026.

PASS DEFENSE

The anchor of the Patriots' defense is cornerback Christian Gonzalez, a first-round pick in the 2023 NFL draft. And considering he's only 23 years old, the best is likely still to come. He flashed some of that potential at times last season, including in the Super Bowl when he had three passes defensed. The rest of his season was good, mixed in with flashes of greatness at times. He and Carlton Davis formed a good cornerback duo, but there is no doubt the competition they'll face this season will be a lot better. The

Patriots will need a step up to greatness from Gonzalez for them to maintain the standard they set last year. The Pats did have the ninth-best passing defense in the game, giving up just 193.5 air yards per game. But they'll need more.

his 37 field goals (84.4 percent) and was even 4 for 4 from 50 yards or longer. In the playoffs he was 4 of 6, but he did miss both his kicks beyond 40 yards, so he still has something to prove. They also have a young punter in Bryce Baringer whose

Christian Barmore

They'll need a lot more from a pass rush that, at times, was non-existent last season. They got just 35 sacks in the regular season, when only six teams had fewer. Worse, they lost K'Lavon Chiasson in free agency. He had 7.5 sacks last season, or about 21 percent of New England's total. They still do have Harold Landry, who led the team with 8.5 sacks, but they'll need someone to step up and replace Chiasson's production. Otherwise that will take an even greater toll on a secondary that needs better production, too.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Pats got generally good consistency from their specialists, including rookie kicker Andres Borregales, who they took in the sixth round of the 2025 draft. He made 32 of

numbers dipped a bit last season. Some of that, though, was because they didn't need him to punt as much as they did in previous years.

BOTTOM LINE

Vrabel is an elite coach and Maye is an elite quarterback and that's more than half the battle in the NFL. The Patriots have some holes in their surrounding cast, but they still have more than enough talent to be considered a contender. The big thing for them is that the schedule almost certainly won't be as easy this season. They won't be able to glide into the playoffs again and the season will feel like more of a grind. They can survive that and could even still compete for a division title. Everything will just be harder this time around.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Mike Vrabel
First season with Patriots: 2025
Regular-season record with Patriots: 14–3 (82.4%)
Offensive coordinator: Josh McDaniels
Defensive coordinator: Zak Kuhr
Special teams coordinator: Jeremy Springer

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Ashton Grant
Running backs: Tony Dews
Wide receivers: Todd Downing
Tight ends/passing game coordinator: Thomas Brown
Offensive line: Doug Marrone
Assistant offensive line: Jason Houghtaling
Offensive line assistant: Jonathan Decoster
Offensive analyst: Charles London
Offensive assistant: Chuckie Keeton

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Clinton McMillan
Inside linebackers: Vinny DePalma
Outside linebackers: Mike Smith
Cornerbacks: Justin Hamilton
Secondary: Scott Booker
Defensive analyst: Shane Bowen
Defensive assistant: B.J. Edmonds
Defensive assistant: Kevin Richardson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	17–4	81.0%	5–1	8–3	9–0
2024–25	4–13	23.5%	2–4	2–6	2–6
2023–24	4–13	23.5%	2–4	1–7	3–5
2022–23	8–9	47.1%	3–3	4–4	4–5
2021–22	10–8	55.6%	3–4	4–5	6–3
2020–21	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2019–20	12–5	70.6%	5–1	6–3	6–2
2018–19	14–5	73.7%	5–1	9–0	4–5
2017–18	15–4	79.0%	5–1	8–2	6–1
2016–17	17–2	89.5%	5–1	8–2	8–0
2015–16	13–5	72.2%	4–2	8–1	5–4
2014–15	15–4	79.0%	4–2	9–1	5–3
2013–14	13–5	72.2%	4–2	9–0	4–5
2012–13	13–5	72.2%	6–0	7–3	5–2
2011–12	15–4	79.0%	5–1	9–1	6–2
2010–11	14–3	82.4%	5–2	8–1	6–2
2009–10	10–7	58.8%	4–2	8–1	2–6
2008–09	11–5	68.8%	4–2	5–3	6–2
2007–08	18–1	94.7%	6–0	10–0	8–0
2006–07	14–5	73.7%	5–2	6–3	8–2

New York Jets

It's hard to find much that went right in the first year of the Aaron Glenn era. Their experiment with Justin Fields at quarterback was a bust. They had one of the worst offenses and worst defenses in the NFL. Their defense, in fact, didn't have a single interception all season long. And they bottomed out so hard, that GM Darren Mougey decided to completely rebuild and traded away the Jets' two best defensive players—defensive tackle Quinnen Williams and cornerback Sauce Gardner.

Maybe worst of all, though, the Jets didn't lose enough. Their three wins left them with the second pick in the NFL Draft—not quite high enough to get the only quarterback deemed worthy of a first-round pick. Where does that leave them in Year 2? In basically the same situation, trying to rebuild a program without a franchise quarterback, while trying to snap a streak of 15 straight years without making the playoffs—the longest current streak in professional sports. It's not a pretty picture, though with the Jets it rarely is.

Breece Hall

RUNNING GAME

If there is one bright spot under the deep, dark clouds that hung over the Jets, it was the emergence of running back Breece Hall. The 25-year-old broke through the misery of the NFL's third-worst offense for his first 1,000-yard rushing season—1,065 yards and four touchdowns. Considering the lack of a surrounding cast, that was pretty close to elite. And the Jets overall had the 10th best rushing attack in the league, averaging 123.3 yards per game. There's no reason to think that won't continue. Hall is back, after agreeing to a three-year contract in the offseason worth up to $45.75 million, making him one of the top paid RBs in the NFL. And the Jets will return their impressive duo of young tackles that helped power the rushing attack—left tackle Olu Fashanu, a 2024 first-round pick, and right tackle Armand Membou, their first-round pick in 2025.

Even the interior line was better than expected, with Josh Myers at center and Joe Tippman filling in for the injured Alijah Vera-Tucker at right guard. They'll get some veteran help this season with Dylan Parham coming over from Las Vegas, so Hall could end up having more room to run. He also may not have to do it alone this season, as the Jets should get Braelon Allen back. Allen ran for 334 yards and two touchdowns as a rookie in 2024, and his hard-nosed style seemed to be a perfect complement to Hall's flash and speed. But a knee injury limited him to just four games last season. And Isaiah Davis (236 yards) couldn't quite take his place.

Presumably the rushing attack will be the strength of the Jets again, even with new coordinator Frank Reich taking over and Geno Smith settling in at quarterback. It would be smart to lean on what they do best, especially considering the lack of other options in their attack. It's always hard to predict exactly what the Jets will do, though. Given their stunning run of bad luck over several decades, they know better than anyone that things rarely go as planned.

PASSING GAME

It stands to reason that the Jets have been searching for consistency in their passing game for as long as they've been searching for a franchise quarterback—a search that now dates back more than 50 years since the days of Joe Namath. And don't get excited. This isn't the year their search finally ends. Yes, the Jets have moved on from Fields after they got to see what the Bears and Steelers already knew—that he's not much of a passer. He was a terrible replacement for Aaron Rodgers, even in the diminished state he was playing for the Jets in his 40s. So with no new savior coming through the draft, the Jets turned to the bargain bin of free agency.

Enter Smith, a second-round pick by a long-ago Jets regime way back in 2013. He's 35 now and a better quarterback than he was, but also one with clear flaws and beginning an obvous decline. He was pretty terrible with the Raiders last season, throwing for just 3,025 yards and 19 touchdowns with an NFL-worst 17 interceptions. In fact, between Seattle and Las Vegas, Smith has thrown 32 interceptions over the last two years. That's a problem in an offense where he doesn't have a lot of proven talent around him. The lone exception is a big one—Garrett Wilson, an elite receiver who averaged 93 catches, 1,083 yards and five touchdowns during his first three seasons. Last year he was limited to just seven games by a knee injury. But this is how bad the Jets' receiving corps was: The 395 receiving yards Wilson had in those seven games was still more than enough to lead the team.

The receiving help New York added in the offseason was through the draft. After selecting Oregon tight end Kenyon Sadiq with the 16th overall pick of the NFL Draft, the Jets spent the 30th overall pick on Indiana wideout Omar Cooper. The hope is that Cooper can win the battle for the No. 2 wideout role over receivers Isaiah Williams (26-193-0) and Adonai Mitchell (24-301-2). Sadiq is expected to be the starting tight end ahead of Mason Taylor (44-369-1).

The good news is that Smith is at least a more competent passer than Fields ever was, so those

Garrett Wilson

by David Schoenholt

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	GREEN BAY PACKERS	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Detroit Lions	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Chicago Bears	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at New England Patriots	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	MIAMI DOLPHINS	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at Kansas City Chiefs	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	BUFFALO BILLS	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Los Angeles Chargers	4:05 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	at Miami Dolphins	1:00 p.m.
13		BYE WEEK	
14	Dec. 13	DENVER BRONCOS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Arizona Cardinals	4:05 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	1:00 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	MINNESOTA VIKINGS	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at Buffalo Bills	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Geno Smith	Brady Cook
RB	Breece Hall	Braelon Allen
WR	Garrett Wilson	Isaiah Williams
WR	Adonai Mitchell	Arian Smith
WR	Omar Cooper Jr.	Irvin Charles
TE	Kenyon Sadiq	Mason Taylor
LT	Olu Fashanu	Max Mitchell
LG	Dylan Parham	Xavier Newman
C	Josh Myers	Liam Fornadel
RG	Joe Tippmann	Marquis Hayes
RT	Armand Membou	Chukwuma Okorafor

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	David Bailey	Joseph Ossai
LDT	T'Vondre Sweat	Mazi Smith
RDT	Harrison Phillips	Darrell Jackson Jr.
RDE	Will McDonald IV	Braiden McGregor
WLB	Kiko Mauigoa	Marcelino McCrary-Ball
MLB	Demario Davis	Jamien Sherwood
SLB	Mykal Walker	Kobe King
LCB	D'Angelo Ponds	Azareye'h Thomas
SS	Andre Cisco	Malachi Moore
FS	Minkah Fitzpatrick	Dean Clark
RCB	Brandon Stephens	Nahshon Wright

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Cade York	Austin McNamara

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	2	LB	David Bailey
1	16	TE	Kenyon Sadiq
1	30	WR	Omar Cooper Jr.
2	50	CB	D'Angelo Ponds
4	103	DT	Darrell Jackson Jr.

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	7	OT	Armand Membou
2	42	TE	Mason Taylor
3	73	CB	Azareye'h Thomas
4	110	WR	Arian Smith
4	130	S	Malachi Moore

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	11	T	Olu Fashanu
3	65	WR	Malachi Corley
4	134	RB	Braelon Allen
5	171	QB	Jordan Travis
5	173	RB	Isaiah Davis

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	15	EDGE	Will McDonald
2	43	C	Joe Tippman
4	120	OT	Carter Warren
5	143	RB	Israel Abanikanda
6	184	LB	Zaire Barnes

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	4	CB	Sauce Gardner
1	10	WR	Garrett Wilson
1	26	DE	Jermaine Johnson II
2	36	RB	Breece Hall
3	101	TE	Jeremy Ruckert

Will McDonald IV

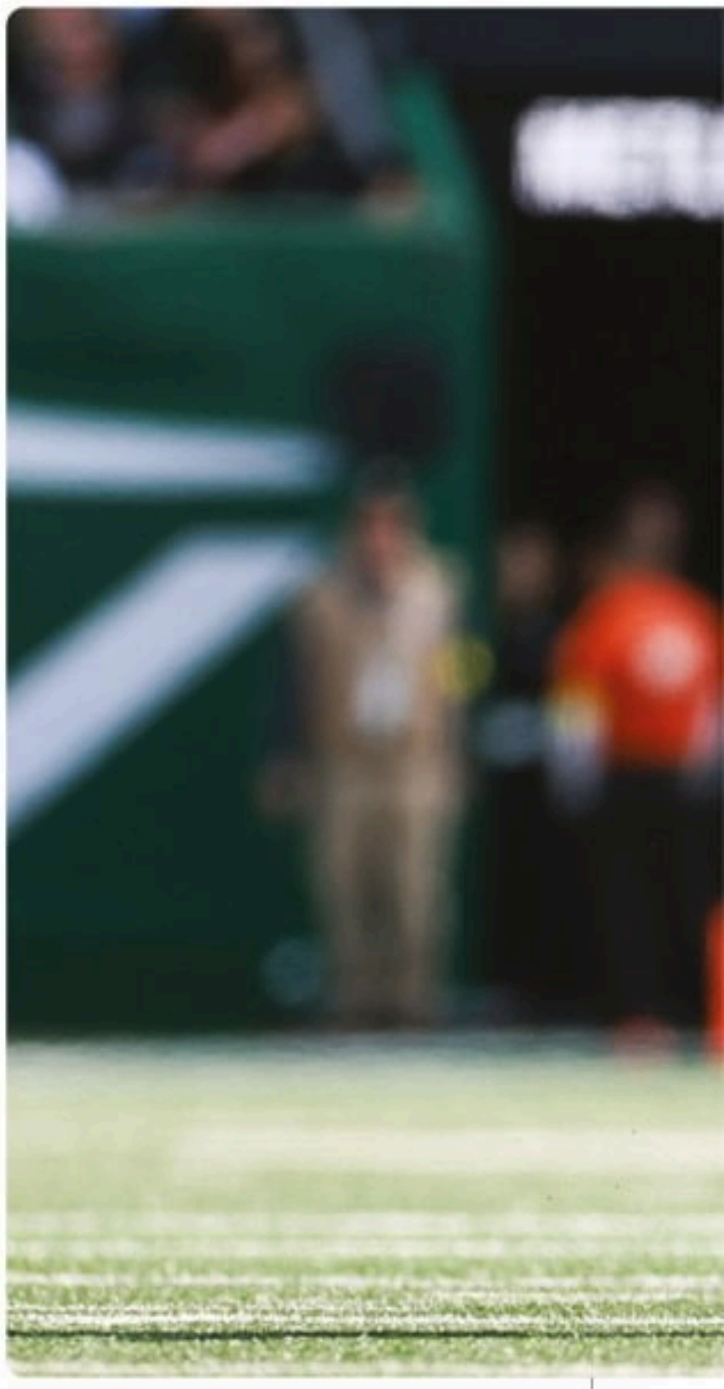
no-name receivers all have a chance to see their numbers improved with more on-target balls thrown their direction. And with Wilson expected to return, fully healthy, their job should be even easier because none of them will be expected to play like a No. 1. Wilson, though, will surely see constant double teams and rolled coverages, which should make for a very frustrating season. And it'll end up being just as difficult for Smith to see a blanket basically thrown over the one receiver he can trust. The only help he has is that Hall has proven to be a decent receiver out of the backfield (36-350-1 last season). But that isn't even close to enough.

So don't expect a lot out of this passing attack. Maybe more than last season, but probably less than they had under Rogers. And expect Smith to just be another name in the rolodex of unimpressive starting quarterbacks that the Jets cycle through year after year. In fact, since Smith made his last start for the Jets in 2016, the franchise has torn through 14 other starting quarterbacks, none of which have worked out well at all. The return of Smith isn't likely to be the one that finally sets the Jets on the long-awaited right path.

RUN DEFENSE

Everything about the Jets was bad last season, so it's no surprise that the run defense was one of the worst in the game, allowing an ugly 139.5 yards on the ground per game. It certainly didn't help that they traded away defensive tackle Quinnen Williams midseason, with no real way to replace him from within. But Glenn made a decision in the offseason that if he was going down, he was going down his way. So he took over the defense, saying that play-calling was his "super power". He may be right. The defense certainly couldn't be worse than it was last season.

And there is some reason to believe the run defense could actually be improved, thanks to a couple of key offseason acquisitions. The big one was their trade with the Tennessee Titans for defensive tackle T'Vondre Sweat. It cost them pass rusher Jermaine Johnson, but it could be a huge pick up for their run defense. A former second-round pick, he's a solid nose tackle with an upside that could potentially be elite.



The other was the free-agent signing of veteran linebacker Demario Davis, another former Jet from many years ago (2012-15). He's 37 now and heading into his 15th season, but he's still a huge upgrade for the Jets' linebacking corps. He also gives Glenn some much-needed leadership as he tries to rebuild the defense. Plus, the five-time All-Pro is still a tackling machine. He had a career-high 143 tackles in New Orleans last year. They won't make the run defense great by any means. But they could make the Jets defense good, which is a huge step up from what it was.

PASS DEFENSE

Statistically the Jets' passing defense was middle of the pack. They gave up an average of 216.1 yards per game, which ranked them 17th in the league. But that number doesn't even come close to telling the story of how ineffective they were. This one, though, does: They were the first team in NFL history to not have a single interception all season

Andre Cisco

long. That feels like it's impossible to do, especially since the talented Sauce Gardner was with them for seven games before he was traded. But the rest of the secondary was weak, the scheme wasn't very aggressive, and the pass rush yielded just 26 sacks, the second-lowest total in the entire league.

But that's another area where the Jets should be better in 2026. They got aggressive in the offseason, trading for veteran safety Minkah Fitzpatrick who should be a steadying force in the secondary. They also took a smart flier on Nahshon Wright, who broke out last year in his fifth NFL season, grabbing five interceptions for the Bears.

The pass rush should be a little better too, after the Jets signed David Onyemata to help out at defensive tackle and Joseph Ossai to come off the edge. Neither are elite pass rushers, but Ossai had five sacks last season, which at least gives a little help to the Jets' best returning pass rusher, Will McDonald (8 sacks). The player from whom the Jets are hoping to get an immediate contribution is edge rusher David Bailey, the former Texas Tech star and second overall selection in April's draft.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Everything is in flux for the Jets, so why wouldn't the specialists be the same? Gone is veteran kicker Nick Folk and in his place is Cade York, who hasn't kicked much since 2022 when he made 75 percent of his field goals with the Browns. They're a little more solid at punter coming off Austin McNamara's stellar rookie season, where he was second in the NFL with 32 punts downed inside the 20.

BOTTOM LINE

Everything about the Jets should be improved, but not by enough to make a difference. With an aging quarterback, a lack of weapons, and question marks everywhere, their ceiling probably isn't much higher than five wins. That's OK, though, because what they're really doing is killing time until the 2027 NFL Draft. That's when they expect to finally find their franchise quarterback. And that's when their rebuilding project can really begin.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Aaron Glenn
First season with Jets: 2025
Regular-season record with Jets: 3–14 (17.6%)
Offensive coordinator: Frank Reich
Defensive coordinator: Brian Duker
Special teams coordinator: Chris Banjo

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Pass game coordinator: Seth Ryan
Quarterbacks: Bill Musgrave
Running backs: Nic McKissic-Luke
Wide receivers: Shawn Jefferson
Tight ends: Alfredo Roberts
Offensive line: Steve Heiden
Assistant offensive line: Al Netter / Brian Natkin
Assistant quarterbacks: Thomas Merkle
Offensive assistant: Matthew Sargent / Junior Taylor

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Karl Dunbar
Assistant defensive line: Cameron Davis
Linebackers: Ben Bolling
Assistant linebackers: Nathaniel Willingham
Defensive backs/pass game coordinator: Chris Harris
Safeties: Ryan Slowik
Defensive assistant/nickels: Ronald Booker
Defensive assistant: Collin Bauer

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	3–14	17.7%	0–6	2–6	1–7
2024–25	5–12	29.4%	2–4	3–5	2–6
2023–24	7–10	41.2%	2–4	4–5	3–5
2022–23	7–10	41.2%	2–4	3–5	4–5
2021–22	4–13	23.5%	0–6	3–6	1–6
2020–21	2–14	12.5%	0–6	1–7	1–7
2019–20	7–9	43.8%	2–4	5–3	2–6
2018–19	4–12	25.0%	1–5	2–6	2–6
2017–18	5–11	31.3%	2–4	4–4	1–7
2016–17	5–11	31.3%	2–4	2–6	3–5
2015–16	10–6	62.5%	3–3	6–2	3–4
2014–15	4–12	25.0%	1–5	2–6	2–5
2013–14	8–8	50.0%	3–3	6–2	2–6
2012–13	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2011–12	8–8	50.0%	3–3	6–2	2–6
2010–11	13–6	68.4%	5–2	5–3	8–3
2009–10	11–8	57.9%	2–4	4–4	6–4
2008–09	9–7	56.3%	4–2	5–3	4–4
2007–08	4–12	25.0%	2–4	3–5	1–7
2006–07	10–7	58.8%	4–3	4–4	6–3

Derrick Henry

Baltimore Ravens

The Baltimore Ravens entered the 2025 season with Super Bowl aspirations, but after finishing just 8-9, they were on the outside looking in of the playoffs. While this is still Lamar Jackson's team, there's a new head coach at the helm for the first time in nearly 20 years. Jesse Minter, the former defensive coordinator for the Los Angeles Chargers, left his job under Jim Harbaugh to take the place of John Harbaugh in Baltimore. The Ravens also brought in Declan Doyle as their new offensive coordinator, replacing Todd Monken. He became the youngest offensive coordinator under Ben Johnson in Chicago and now moves on to Baltimore where he'll be charged with calling plays for the first time.

Many of the key pieces on offense remain in place with Jackson, Derrick Henry and Zay Flowers all back on board for another run. It looked as though Maxx Crosby was on his way to Baltimore to bolster the pass rush via trade, but the Ravens backed out after Crosby's physical. They instead signed Trey Hendrickson in free agency in hopes of improving the pass rush. Even though it's a new regime, the expectations are still high, and the Ravens should contend for the division and a playoff spot once again.

RUNNING GAME

Henry is positioned to be the bellcow back for the Ravens once again in 2026. He's 32 now and is coming off his second straight season with more than 300 carries. The bruising back finished the season second in rushing with 1,595 yards, which was just 26 yards behind Buffalo's James Cook. And he averaged 5.2 yards per carry, which was above his career average of 4.9.

King Henry has defied the odds in the past, as the majority of running backs experience a significant decline in production by his age, but once you factor in he's averaging more than 315 carries per season over the past four

Lamar Jackson

by Ed Williams

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Indianapolis Colts	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	vs. Dallas (in Rio de Janeiro)	4:25 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	TENNESSEE TITANS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Atlanta Falcons	8:20 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Cleveland Browns	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	CINCINNATI BENGALS	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Buffalo Bills	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 5	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	8:15 p.m.
10	Nov. 16	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	8:15 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Carolina Panthers	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	at Houston Texans	1:00 p.m.
13		BYE WEEK	
14	Dec. 13	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Pittsburgh Steelers	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
17	Dec. 31	at Cincinnati Bengals	8:15 p.m.
18	TBD	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	TBD

years on top of his age, there is reason for some trepidation. With Jackson and his duel-threat ability under center again, there are still plenty of weapons for the offense to worry about, which should give Henry room to run again, but when will Father Time catch up to him?

Keaton Mitchell departed in free agency, which leaves Justice Hill and Rasheen Ali as the primary backups. While Hill won't instill fear into the hearts of defenses with his rushing ability, he's a reliable pass-catching option on third downs. Hill hauled in 21 catches last season, but tallied 42 grabs in 2024. With Mitchell no longer in the mix, Hill could see an uptick in production that's closer to his 2024 numbers.

Last year, the offensive line ranked 11th in the league per Pro Football Network's Offensive Line Impact (OLi) rankings. But arguably the game's best center, Tyler Linderbaum, left for the Raiders via free agency. Guard Daniel Faalele also departed, but Ronnie Stanley and Roger Rosengarten return at offensive tackle and Andrew Vorhees is back at the other guard position. Linderbaum leaves a big hole to fill, but there are still some quality pieces in place on the rest of the line. Long-time Ravens Pro Bowl fullback Patrick Ricard decided to follow John Harbaugh to the New York Giants, which means another component of the running game is in flux. If Baltimore plans on leaning on the fullback position again, only second-year player Lucas Scott remained on the roster following the draft.

PASSING GAME

Jackson is one of the best quarterbacks in the league whenever he puts on the pads. But that's a very important distinction. Jackson won the league's MVP award in his first season as the full-time starter in 2019, and he followed that up by starting 15 games the following season. But in 2021 and 2022, Jackson couldn't stay healthy. Jackson went down with a grade 2 ankle sprain in Week 14 of 2021, forcing him to miss the rest of the season. And then in 2022, he went down in Week 13 with a PCL sprain, again shutting him down for the rest of the season and playoffs.

Jackson bounced back in 2023, staying healthy and winning MVP once again, becoming the youngest player (27) to win a second time. He's also one of just 11 players to win the award multiple times in history. Jackson kept things going in 2024, putting up a

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Lamar Jackson	Tyler Huntley
RB	Derrick Henry	Justice Hill
WR	Zay Flowers	Devontez Walker
WR	Rashod Bateman	Elijah Sarratt
WR	Ja'Kobi Lane	LaJohntay Wester
TE	Mark Andrews	Durham Smythe
LT	Ronnie Stanley	Gerad Lichtenhan
LG	Olaivavega Ioane	Andrew Vorhees
C	Danny Pinter	Corey Bullock
RG	John Simpson	Jared Penning
RT	Roger Rosengarten	Carson Vinson

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Nnamdi Madubuike	Broderick Washington
NT	Travis Jones	CJ Okoye
RDE	John Jenkins	David Olajiga
WLB	Tavius Robinson	Zion Young
LILB	Roquan Smith	Carl Jones
RILB	Teddye Buchanan	Trenton Simpson
SLB	Trey Hendrickson	Mike Green
LCB	Nate Wiggins	Amani Oruwariye
SS	Kyle Hamilton	Keondre Jackson
FS	Malaki Starks	Jaylinn Hawkins
RCB	Chidobe Awuzie	T.J. Tampa

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Tyler Loop	Ryan Eckley

Travis Jones

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	14	G	Vega Ioane
2	45	OLB	Zion Young
3	80	WR	Ja'Kobi Lane
4	115	WR	Elijah Sarratt
4	133	TE	Matthew Hibner

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	27	S	Malaki Starks
2	59	LB	Mike Green
3	91	OT	Emery Jones
4	129	LB	Teddye Buchanan
5	141	OT	Carson Vinson

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	30	CB	Nate Wiggins
2	62	T	Roger Rosengarten
3	93	EDGE	Adisa Isaac
4	113	WR	Devontez Walker
4	130	CB	T.J. Tampa

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	22	WR	Zay Flowers
3	86	LB	Trenton Simpson
4	124	EDGE	Tavius Robinson
5	157	CB	Kyu Blue Kelly
6	199	OT	Malaesala Aumavae-Laulu

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	14	S	Kyle Hamilton
1	25	C	Tyler Linderbaum
2	45	OLB	David Ojabo
3	76	NT	Travis Jones
4	110	OT	Daniel Faalele

career-high 4,172 passing yards, but he was narrowly edged out by Josh Allen in MVP voting. But then the injury bug bit Jackson once again in 2025 as he missed multiple games due to a hamstring injury in October and then missed some more time in December with a back contusion.

Jackson will have to learn a new system under Doyle this year, but if Jackson can stay on the field, his talent should help overcome any learning curves. With weapons like Jackson, Henry and Flowers, Doyle is set up for success. Dealing with injuries last year, Jackson scaled back on his rushing attempts, but prior to 2025, the two-time MVP also rushed for more than 764 yards in every other season he was the full-time starter. He even cracked the 1,000 rushing yards mark in both 2019 and 2020 and fell just shy of the mark in 2024 with 915 yards.

When it comes to receiving options, the Ravens are a little thin. Flowers is a Pro Bowler, and Rashod Bateman and Mark Andrews will also contribute. DeAndre Hopkins and Isaiah Likely departed the team via free agency, so there are some additional targets to spread around this season. The 5-foot-9 Flowers was seventh in the league with 1,211 receiving yards and was 11th with 86 receptions. While he continues to put up excellent receiving numbers, he hasn't had as much success in hitting paydirt as the elite receivers in the game. Flowers found the end zone five times last year, which tied his career-high but was also tied for just 46th in the league.

After Flowers, there's a steep drop-off in terms of production from 2025. After an absolutely brutal drop on a potential game-tying 2-point conversion against the Bills in the AFC divisional round of the playoffs, many assumed Andrews would be on his way out of Baltimore in 2025 with Likely ready to take on more snaps. Not only was Andrews back, but he also signed a three-year extension in December 2025, so he should once again be a primary target for Jackson. Andrews turns 31 in September and racked up just 422 yards receiving and five touchdowns, but with Likely no longer competing with him for snaps, he should see an uptick in targets. Rashod Bateman was a first-round draft pick in 2021, but he's never really lived up to expectations. His career-high in yards came in 2024 with 756 yards and an impressive nine touchdowns. But outside of 2024, which coincided with Lamar Jackson's career-best passing numbers, Bateman's next-best season of production was his rookie year. And last year he only managed 224 yards and saw just 38 targets in 13 games.

RUN DEFENSE

While the offense had its issues last season, the defense was the biggest culprit in the Ravens missing the playoffs. While the pass rush may have been the biggest weakness on the team, the rushing defense was solid, ranking 10th in the league in rushing yards allowed with 1,813 on 4.2 yards per carry.

Travis Jones does a good job of clogging things up in the middle, and Roquan Smith remains one of the league's elite run stoppers at the linebacker position. Jones led the defensive interior with 47 tackles, nine tackles for loss and five sacks. Nnamdi Madubuike missed most of 2025 with a neck injury, but he's also a key cog in the unit if his health holds up. And Broderick Washington will also look to bounce back from an injury. If health doesn't cooperate, though, this could be a thin unit. The team did draft edge Zion Young, who could bring a physical presence against the run.

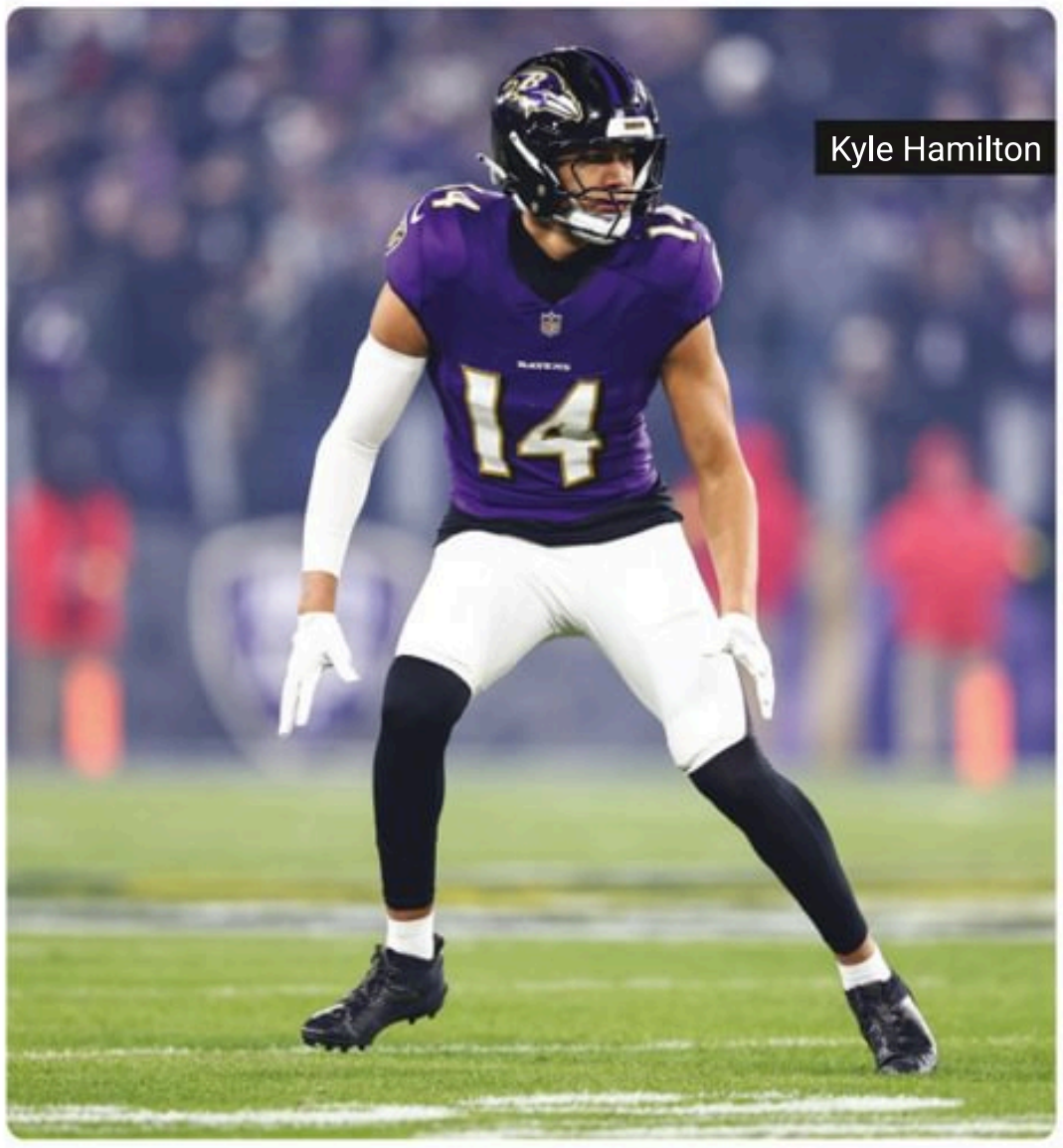
Smith has been a Pro Bowler in every full season in Baltimore, and he'll look to run it back again in 2026. Smith compiled 130 tackles on the season and even returned one fumble 63 yards for a touchdown. At age 29, Smith is fully expected to lead the team in tackles again, and try to force offenses to beat them through the air.

PASS DEFENSE

While the pass defense turned things around late in the season, it was the team's biggest issue early on and helped dig a 1-5 hole that was too deep to climb out of. Through Week 5, the Ravens were allowing 35.4 points per game, which was dead last. The abominable start was a catalyst in trading former first-round pick Odafe Oweh for safety Alohi Gilman. By bringing in Gilman, the Ravens were able to play defensive Swiss army knife Kyle Hamilton closer to the line of scrimmage. With

Hamilton closer to the line, the pass rush started making gains, which in turn made life easier on the secondary.

But the Ravens made the pass rush the primary objective of the offseason. It looked as though they had a trade lined up for Raiders star edge Maxx Crosby, but after Crosby failed his physical, the trade was off. But Baltimore pivoted and signed Bengals edge roster. But following allegations of improper sexual conduct, the Ravens cut Tucker in May 2025. The Ravens drafted Tyler Loop and he had a solid year, but he missed a 44-yard field goal on the final play of the season that kept the Ravens out of the playoffs. He was 30-of-34 on field goal attempts and was perfect inside 40 yards. Meanwhile, the Ravens will have a new punter after Jordan Stout,



Kyle Hamilton

Hendrickson to a massive four-year, $112 million contract. After a couple years of seemingly constant trade rumors, Hendrickson finally gets a change of scenery and also gets to face his former team at least twice every year. Hendrickson only played in seven games last year with a core muscle injury, but he was a Pro Bowler the four seasons before that and racked up 17.5 sacks in both 2023 and 2024. If Hendrickson can regain his form, and the rest of the defense builds on its late-season improvements, they could see a nice bounce-back in 2026—especially with the defensive-minded Minter as the new head coach.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Kicking was never even a thought for the longest time for the Ravens with Justin Tucker on the who was fourth in the league with an average of 50.1 yards per punt, left in the offseason.

BOTTOM LINE

The Ravens missed the playoffs for the first time since 2017, which was the catalyst for ending the John Harbaugh era. But two-time MVP Jackson, future Hall of Famer Henry and Pro Bowler Flowers are back anchoring the offense. The addition of Hendrickson should greatly improve the pass rush and could be the missing ingredient the defense needs. The rest of the division is dealing with change too with Pittsburgh and Cleveland bringing in new coaching staffs, and an already underwhelming defense in Cincinnati losing Hendrickson. There are still questions with this squad, but they should still compete for the division title.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Jesse Minter
Former Chargers defensive coordinator, 2024–25
Former Michigan defensive coordinator, 2022–23
Offensive coordinator: Declan Doyle
Defensive coordinator: Anthony Weaver
Special teams coordinator: Anthony Levine

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Pass game coordinator: Marcus Brady
Quarterbacks: Israel Woolfork
Running backs: Eddie Faulkner
Wide receivers: Keary Colbert
Assistant wide receivers: Prentice Gill
Tight ends: Zack Grossi
Offensive line/run game coordinator: Dwayne Ledford
Assistant offensive line: Shawn Flaherty
Senior offensive assistant: Joe Lombardi

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Lou Esposito
Outside linebackers: Harland Bower
Inside linebackers: Tyler Santucci
Assistant linebackers: Matt O'Donnell
Pass game coordinator/secondary: Mike Mickens
Safeties: P.J. Volker
Assistant defensive backs: Miles Taylor
Football analyst: Rick Minter
Game management coordinator: Charlie Gelman

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	8–9	47.1%	3–3	3–6	5–3
2024–25	13–6	68.4%	5–2	7–2	6–4
2023–24	14–5	73.7%	3–3	7–4	6–1
2022–23	10–8	55.6%	3–4	5–3	5–5
2021–22	8–9	47.1%	1–5	5–4	3–5
2020–21	12–6	66.7%	4–2	5–3	7–3
2019–20	14–3	82.4%	5–1	7–2	7–1
2018–19	10–7	58.8%	3–3	6–3	4–4
2017–18	9–7	56.3%	3–3	5–3	4–3
2016–17	8–8	50.0%	4–2	6–2	2–6
2015–16	5–11	31.3%	3–3	3–5	2–6
2014–15	11–7	61.1%	4–3	6–2	5–5
2013–14	8–8	50.0%	3–3	6–2	2–6
2012–13	14–6	70.0%	4–2	7–2	6–4
2011–12	13–5	72.2%	6–0	9–0	4–5
2010–11	13–5	72.2%	4–3	7–1	6–4
2009–10	10–8	55.6%	3–3	6–2	4–6
2008–09	13–6	68.4%	4–3	6–2	7–4
2007–08	5–11	31.3%	1–5	4–4	1–7
2006–07	13–4	76.5%	5–1	7–2	6–2

Cincinnati Bengals

After coming up short against the Rams in the Super Bowl and then reaching the AFC championship game in 2022-23, the Cincinnati Bengals were shut out of the playoffs the last three seasons. After finishing 9-8 in 2023 and 2024, the Bengals fell to 6-11 in 2025. Joe Burrow's health was a major issue in 2025, just as it was in 2023. Last season, he suffered a turf toe injury in Week 2 and he wasn't able to return until Nov. 27 against the Ravens. The Bengals were an abysmal 1-8 with Burrow sidelined.

The other issue the Bengals have dealt with for the last three seasons now is the effectiveness of the defense. While the Bengals have shelled out big-money deals for Burrow, Ja'Marr Chase and Tee Higgins, they've struggled to secure big-name talent on the defensive side of the ball. Trey Hendrickson was their best pass rusher, but he left via free agency, joining the rival Ravens in the offseason. The team tried to address that by trading for defensive tackle Dexter Lawrence—and then signed him to a one-year, $28 million extension through 2028. The Bengals have their entire starting offense returning, so if Burrow can stay healthy, the major question remaining will be whether the defense can make some major improvements.

RUNNING GAME

With the starting role all to himself in 2025, Chase Brown reached the 1,000 rushing yards mark for the first time in his career with 1,019 yards. The total might not seem too impressive at first glance, but with Burrow missing such a large chunk of the season, defenses were able to use more resources to stop the run. Brown was able to break through for his first 100-yard game of the season in Week 7 against the Steelers, racking up 108 yards on just 11 carries. Brown would go on to average 5.17 yards per carry the rest of the way. He has the ability to wreak havoc in open space, so he's become a weapon in the passing

Joe Burrow

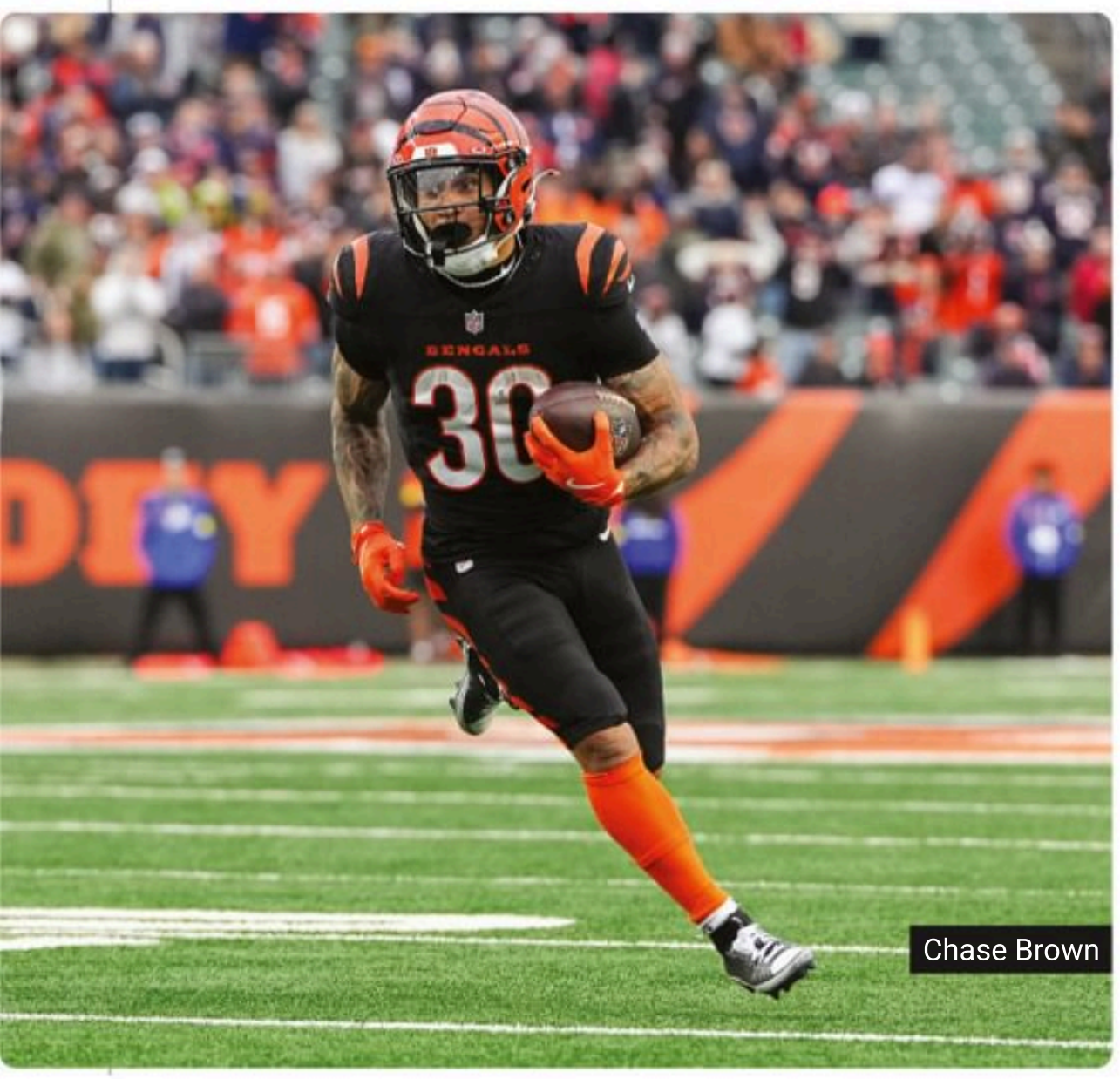
game as well, as he hauled in 69 receptions for 437 yards. Brown also made the most of his touches, reaching paydirt six times on the ground and adding five more scores in the passing game.

After spending 2023 with the Broncos and 2024 with the Chiefs, Samaje Perine returned the Bengals in 2025 to add some stability behind Brown. Perine remains one of the most reliable pass-catching backs in the game, so whenever Brown needs a breather, Perine is ready to step up. Tahj Brooks returns for his sophomore season and enters the season behind Perine on the depth chart. While the offensive line was greatly improved overall, the unit still struggled in the running game at times. Right guard Dalton Risner was the top performer based on Pro Football Focus' run blocking grades as he finished 27th out of 81 guards. After that, though, the results were mediocre at best. Center Ted Karras finished 32nd out of 40 centers, left guard Dylan Fairchild finished 62nd of 81 guards and tackles Amarius Mims and Orlando Brown Jr. finished 47th and 61st out of 89 tackles, respectively.

The entire offensive line unit returns for 2026, though, so continuity will not be an issue. After a year of improvement in pass protection, making some gains in run blocking shouldn't be out of the question. But Burrow's health remains a big factor, even for the running game. If Burrow can stay on the field, defenses have to pay much more attention to the passing game, which should help open up some lanes for Brown and company. If the offensive line can improve on its run blocking, then the offense as a whole could be scary.

PASSING GAME

When Burrow is healthy, the Bengals boast an elite passing attack. Even though Burrow missed half of last season with a turf toe injury, he was still able to compile 1,809 yards, 17 touchdowns and just five interceptions. His health is always paramount when it comes to the success of the franchise. And while the offensive line isn't an elite unit, their production last season gave room for optimism for 2026. The offensive line has long been an issue in Cincinnati, but things started to improve with a restructured unit in 2025. They allowed 36 sacks on the season, which was 14th in the league, but when you factor



Chase Brown

by Ed Williams

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Houston Texans	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Pittsburgh Steelers	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Miami Dolphins	1:00 p.m.
6		BYE WEEK	
7	Oct. 25	at Baltimore Ravens	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	TENNESSEE TITANS	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	vs. Atlanta Falcons (in Madrid)	9:30 a.m.
10	Nov. 15	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	8:20 p.m.
11	Nov. 23	at Washington Commanders	8:15 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Cleveland Browns	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	4:25 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Carolina Panthers	1:00 p.m.
16	TBD	at Indianapolis Colts	TBD
17	Dec. 31	BALTIMORE RAVENS	8:15 p.m.
18	TBD	CLEVELAND BROWNS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Joe Burrow	Joe Flacco
RB	Chase Brown	Samaje Perine
WR	Ja'Marr Chase	Colbie Young
WR	Tee Higgins	Mitchell Tinsley
WR	Andrei Iosivas	Charlie Jones
TE	Mike Gesicki	Erick All Jr.
LT	Orlando Brown Jr.	Javon Foster
LG	Dylan Fairchild	-
C	Ted Karras	Connor Lew
RG	Dalton Risner	Jalen Rivers
RT	Amarius Mims	Cody Ford

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Boye Mafe	Shemar Stewart
LDT	Dexter Lawrence II	T.J. Slaton Jr.
RDT	Jonathan Allen	B.J. Hill
RDE	Myles Murphy	Cashius Howell
WLB	Demetrius Knight Jr.	Shaka Heyward
MLB	Barrett Carter	Joe Giles-Harris
SLB	Oren Burks	Liam Anderson
LCB	Dax Hill	Tacario Davis
SS	Jordan Battle	Kyle Dugger
FS	Bryan Cook	PJ Jules
RCB	DJ Turner II	Josh Newton

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Evan McPherson	Ryan Rehkow

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	41	DE	Cashius Howell
3	72	CB	Tacario Davis
4	128	C	Connor Lew
4	140	WR	Colbie Young
6	189	C	Brian Parker II

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	17	DE	Shemar Stewart
2	49	LB	Demetrius Knight
3	81	OG	Dylan Fairchild
4	119	LB	Barrett Carter
5	153	OG	Jalen Rivers

2024

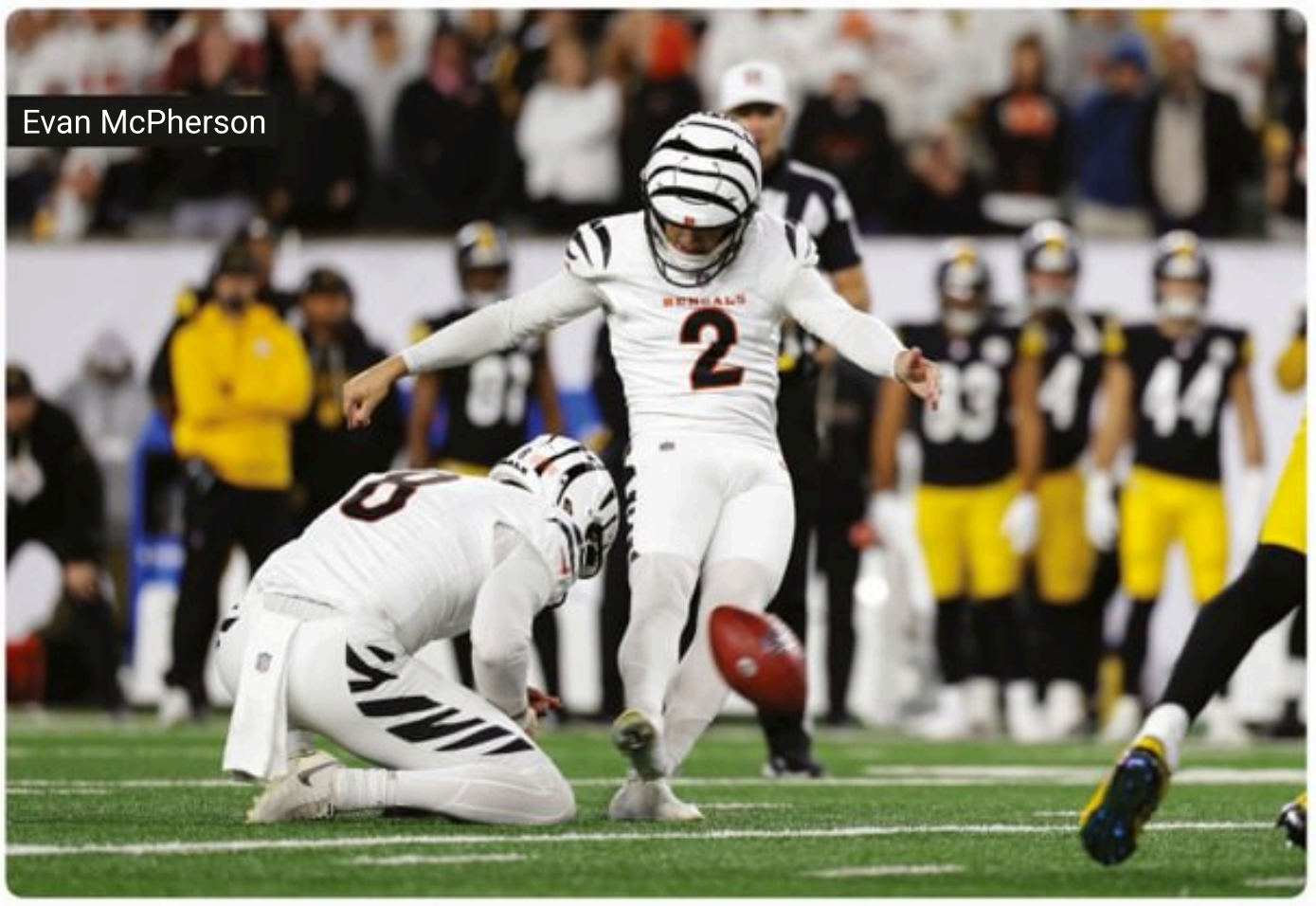
Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	18	T	Amarius Mims
2	49	DT	Kris Jenkins Jr.
3	80	WR	Jermaine Burton
3	97	DT	McKinnley Jackson
4	115	TE	Erick All

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	28	DE	Myles Murphy
2	60	CB	DJ Turner
3	95	S	Jordan Battle
4	131	WR	Charlie Jones
5	163	RB	Chase Brown

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	31	S	Daxton Hill
2	60	CB	Cam Taylor-Britt
3	95	DT	Zachary Carter
4	136	OT	Cordell Volson
5	166	S	Tycen Anderson


Evan McPherson

in their 688 dropbacks (second in the league), they had a sack rate of just 5.3 percent, which was good for ninth in the league. Once Burrow returned on Thanksgiving, the line was credited with a 93.1 pass-blocking grade per Pro Football Focus the rest of the year, which was best in the league during that stretch.

The tackles in particular really showed some improvement—Orlando Brown Jr. and Amarius Mims. Brown struggled out of the gates for the first half of the season, allowing 33 pressures in the team's first 11 games. But he turned a corner after that, grading out at a 90.0 or better in consecutive games in December. Mims was drafted in 2024 and went through some growing pains during his rookie season. He struggled a bit early in 2025 as well, but like Brown, he had a stellar second half. From Weeks 11-18, Mims posted a 78.2 grade per PFF and did not allow a single sack during that span. If Mims and Brown pick up where they left off and continue making improvements, this offense will be hard to stop. So, if Burrow is healthy and the offensive line keeps him upright, defenses have plenty to be concerned about because the Bengals also boast arguably the greatest WR duo in the league with Chase and Higgins. Even with Burrow missing half the season, Chase was still third in the league in catches with 125 and was first in targets with 185. The next closest in targets was Amon-Ra St. Brown with 172. Chase was also fourth in receiving yards with 1,412 and 11th in receiving touchdowns with eight.

While Chase is the clear WR1 on the squad, Higgins was the one who led the way with 11 receiving touchdowns, which was second in the entire league. Higgins played in 15 games and ended up with 846 yards. Those yardage numbers should only improve if Burrow's health cooperates in 2026. After the dynamic duo, though, there isn't a lot of pass-catching options instilling fear in defenses. While Brown can be a receiving weapon out of the backfield, Drew Sample and Mike Gesicki are the options at tight end, and Andrei Iosivas is the WR3. Even with Burrow missing half the season, the Bengals progressed on offense in some areas despite challenging circumstances. With the entire offensive line remaining together, there's reason to be optimistic they'll continue to improve. And if Burrow can stay on the field all season, defenses won't just be able to hone in on stopping the run and forcing Joe Flacco or Josh Johnson to beat them.

RUN DEFENSE

Defense in general has been an issue for Cincinnati the last few years, and the run defense struggled with consistency in 2025. The Bengals gave up an eye-popping 2,500 yards, which was the most in the league, with an average of 5.2 yards per carry. While the final numbers are not pretty, there were some silver linings as the season progressed. After their Week 10 bye week, Cincinnati's run defense started to make some improvements. Heading into the break, the Bengals were dead last with a 50 percent rushing success rate. But after the bye, Cincy rebounded in a big way and that percentage dropped to 38.2 percent, which was good for eighth during that span.

After acquiring Lawrence, the Bengals hope that he can return to being a dominant run-stuffer after a down 2025 following an elbow injury the previous season. Linebackers Demetrius Knight Jr. and Barrett Carter struggled at times during their rookie seasons last year, but with a full season under their belts, they should be more consistent in 2026. The

Bengals signed DT Jonathan Allen to a two-year, $26 million deal and also added Bryan Cook at safety. Jordan Battle also returns at the other safety position, and he led the Bengals with a career-high 125 tackles.

PASS DEFENSE

While the run defense made some strides late in the season, the pass defense struggled for most of the year. It didn't help that Hendrickson, one of the league's elite pass rushers, was sidelined most of the year with a core muscle injury. But nevertheless, Cincy gave up 4,175 passing yards (eighth most in the league), 7.8 yards per attempt (fourth most) and 33 passing touchdowns (third most). The Bengals held their own against WRs, though, thanks largely in part to the emergence of DJ Turner II in his third season. Turner often had the responsibility of covering the opposing team's top WR, but he still earned PFF's sixth best coverage grade out of 112 cornerbacks. He was tied for second in passes defensed with 18 and led the league in forced incompletion rate at 25.8 percent.

The Bengals also have some new pieces ahead of the 2026 season. In addition to adding Lawrence—who put up sack totals before his down season last year—Cincinnati also signed Cook, Ja'Sir Taylor at CB, Boye Mafe at edge, Allen at DT, and drafted edge Cashius Howell. And while Battle is a factor in the running game, he also tallied four INTs, which was eighth in the league, and helps fortify the backend of the pass defense. If the Bengals aspire to get back to being a Super Bowl contender, the pass defense needs to make some major strides in 2026. The good news is that there are pieces to be optimistic about, and if they can all gel together, then this defense could look vastly improved from last year's unit.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Darrin Simmons will be back for this 24th season with the Bengals, making him the longest-tenured coach in Cincy. And after a 2024 season marred by injury, Evan McPherson went 25-for-28 on field goal attempts for an 89.3 percent success rate last season. He also nailed a 63-yard field goal, which was the fourth-longest in 2025. Ryan Rehkow has also emerged as one of the league's top punters. He averaged 50.5 yards per punt in 2025, which was fourth in the league.

BOTTOM LINE

The Bengals have underperformed for three years in a row. While much of Cincinnati's success hinges on the sustained health of Burrow, there were silver linings to be found even in some of the Bengals' most troublesome areas. If the offensive line continues to improve and if the news pieces on defense gel together, the Bengals should be playoff-bound once again, and the AFC North crown is not out of the realm of possibilities.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Zac Taylor
First season with Bengals: 2019
Regular-season record with Bengals: 52–63–1 (45.3%)
Offensive coordinator: Dan Pitcher
Defensive coordinator: Al Golden
Special teams coordinator: Darrin Simmons

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Passing game coordinator: Justin Rascati
Quarterbacks: Brad Kragthorpe
Assistant quarterbacks: Jordan Salkin
Running backs: Justin Hill
Wide receivers: Troy Walters
Assistant wide receivers: Davis Koetter
Tight ends/run game coordinator: James Casey
Offensive line: Scott Peters
Assistant offensive line: Michael McCarthy

DEFENSE

Defensive line/run game coordinator: Jerry Montgomery
Assistant defensive line: Mike Moon
Linebackers: Michael Hodges
Assistant linebackers: Ronnie Regula
Secondary/cornerbacks: Charles Burks
Secondary/safeties: Jordan Kovacs
Senior defensive assistant: Sean Desai

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	6–11	35.3%	3–3	3–6	3–5
2024–25	9–8	52.9%	3–3	3–5	6–3
2023–24	9–8	52.9%	1–5	6–3	3–5
2022–23	14–5	73.7%	4–3	7–1	7–4
2021–22	13–8	61.9%	4–2	6–3	7–4
2020–21	4–11–1	26.7%	1–5	3–5	1–6–1
2019–20	2–14	12.5%	1–5	2–6	0–7
2018–19	6–10	37.5%	1–5	4–4	2–6
2017–18	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2016–17	6–9–1	40.0%	3–3	4–3	2–6
2015–16	12–5	70.6%	5–2	6–3	6–2
2014–15	10–6–1	62.5%	3–3	5–2–1	5–4
2013–14	11–6	64.7%	3–3	8–1	3–5
2012–13	10–7	58.8%	3–3	4–4	6–3
2011–12	9–8	52.9%	2–4	4–4	5–4
2010–11	4–12	25.0%	2–4	3–5	1–7
2009–10	10–7	58.8%	6–0	6–3	4–4
2008–09	4–11–1	26.7%	1–5	3–4–1	1–7
2007–08	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2006–07	8–8	50.0%	4–2	4–4	4–4

Quinshon Judkins

Cleveland Browns

The Cleveland Browns struggled mightily in 2025, compiling a 5-12 record and finishing at the bottom of the AFC North. The lone bright spot came on the defensive side of the ball as Myles Garrett broke the NFL's single-season sack record with 23, besting the previous mark by half a sack. But after that, it's hard to find too much to be excited about. Despite winning two Coach of the Year awards, Kevin Stefanski was given a pink slip after six seasons, and former Ravens offensive coordinator Todd Monken was brought in as the new head coach. While Monken is a highly respected offensive mind, he's walking into a situation severely lacking when it comes to playmaking ability. In fact, the team averaged just 16.4 points per game in 2025, which was second to last in the entire league.

Even the quarterback situation is murky at best. The Browns drafted two signal callers in 2025 in Dillon Gabriel and Shedeur Sanders, and they also still have Deshaun Watson on the roster. Watson should be back after a torn Achilles and spending last season on the Reserve/PUP list. Most indications point to a QB battle between Sanders and Watson to see who will start the season under center, but this is far from a predictable situation.

RUNNING GAME

While the offense struggled mightily as a whole, rookie RB Quinshon Judkins had a strong freshman campaign last year. The Browns have struggled at the position ever since Nick Chubb started battling injuries, before he left for the Texans for the 2025 season, but Judkins could be the back they've been searching for. Judkins' status with the team was up in the air last summer when he was arrested on a misdemeanour domestic violence and battery charge in July. Formal charges were never filed, but due to the situation, Judkins missed the beginning of training camp. Even with a delayed start in getting acclimated to the team, Judkins quickly made it obvious he was the most talented back on the roster, leaping ahead of Jerome Ford and Dylan Sampson on the depth chart.

Judkins showed he's more than capable of handling a bellcow workload as he took on 79 percent of the team's rushing attempts when active. Ultimately, he turned 230 carries into 827 rushing yards and converted seven of those totes into touchdowns. He showed some receiving skills as well, hauling in 26 receptions for

171 yards. Perhaps the highlight of the season for the offense was when Judkins took a Week 7 carry and blew by the Miami defense for a 46-yard touchdown.

After an impressive start to the season, Judkins' average yards per carry did dwindle down to 3.6, but he was also running behind a porous offensive line. The Browns entered the offseason with none of their starting offensive linemen under contract. They moved on from OG Wyatt Teller, OT Jack Conklin, OT, Cam Robinson, C Ethan Pocic and OG Joel Bitonio. To rebuild the unit, the Browns traded for Texans OT Tytus Howard, signed OG Zion Johnson and signed C Elgton Jenkins. They also re-signed OG Teven Jenkins and retained Dawand Jones, and then used their first draft pick on offensive tackle Spencer Fano.

Backup running back Jerome Ford departed in free agency, but Dylan Sampson remains. Sampson was also a 2025 rookie and flashed some receiving potential, hauling in 33 receptions for 271 yards and two touchdowns. He only averaged 2.7 yards per carry rushing, but he could be a good third-down option. All things considered, if this new offensive line unit can gel together with a strong training camp and give Judkins some bigger holes to run through, then the rushing offense could take a big step forward.

PASSING GAME

The Browns' passing offense was a bottom-three unit across most categories. They were second-worst in passing yards with 3,152, third-worst in passing touchdowns with just 16 and third-worst in interceptions with 18. But the futility should come as no surprise as the QB position was in flux all season. Training camp started with Watson likely to miss the entire season, and a training camp battle emerged with Kenny Pickett, Joe Flacco and rookies Sanders and Gabriel. Pickett went down with a hamstring injury and missed the entire preseason before being traded to the Raiders.

The Browns went with experience and Joe Flacco was under center in Weeks 1-4. He got off to a rough start, with six interceptions in the first four games. Looking for a spark, Stefanski turned to Gabriel. While Sanders got more headlines, the Browns did draft Gabriel in third round, while they selected Sanders in the fifth. Gabriel wasn't exactly asked to air it out when he took over, so his numbers don't jump off the page. While he had a nice TD/INT ratio of 7-to-2, he was also ranked near the bottom of the league in yards per attempt at 5.1. He was essentially in a game manager role, but as defenses learned more about his tendencies, his production started to slip. Then he suffered a concussion in Week 11, paving the way for Sanders to step in.

Sanders was fortunate enough to face the Raiders in his first start, so he made a great impression with the Cleveland fans, leading the Browns to a 24-10 win. Again, the numbers weren't amazing, but Sanders definitely gave the offense a jolt as he went 11-for-20 for 209 yards, one touchdown and one

Shedeur Sanders

by Ed Williams

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Jacksonville Jaguars	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	CAROLINA PANTHERS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 1	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	8:15 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	BALTIMORE RAVENS	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Pittsburgh Steelers	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at New Orleans Saints	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	HOUSTON TEXANS	1:00 p.m.
11		BYE WEEK	
12	Nov. 29	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	CINCINNATI BENGALS	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	ATLANTA FALCONS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at New York Giants	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	at Baltimore Ravens	1:00 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at Cincinnati Bengals	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Shedeur Sanders	Deshaun Watson
RB	Quinshon Judkins	Dylan Sampson
WR	Jerry Jeudy	Cedric Tillman
WR	KC Concepcion	Isaiah Bond
WR	Denzel Boston	Malachi Corley
TE	Harold Fannin Jr.	Jack Stoll
LT	Spencer Fano	Dawand Jones
LG	Zion Johnson	Kendrick Green
C	Elgton Jenkins	Luke Wypler
RG	Teven Jenkins	Zak Zinter
RT	Tytus Howard	KT Leveston

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Alex Wright	Isaiah McGuire
LDT	Mason Graham	Kalia Davis
RDT	Maliek Collins	Mike Hall Jr.
RDE	Myles Garrett	Julian Okwara
WLB	J. Owusu-Koramoah	-
MLB	Carson Schwesinger	Nathaniel Watson
SLB	Quincy Williams	Justin Jefferson
LCB	Denzel Ward	Anthony Kendall
SS	Grant Delpit	Christopher Edmonds
FS	Ronnie Hickman	E. McNeil-Warren
RCB	Tyson Campbell	Dom Jones

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Andre Szmyt	Corey Bojorquez

Denzel Ward

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	9	T	Spencer Fano
1	24	WR	KC Concepcion
2	39	WR	Denzel Boston
2	58	S	Emmanuel McNeil-Warren
3	86	T	Austin Barber

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	5	DT	Mason Graham
2	33	LB	Carson Schwesinger
2	36	RB	Quinshon Judkins
3	67	TE	Harold Fannin
3	94	QB	Dillon Gabriel

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	54	DT	Michael Hall
3	85	G	Zak Zinter
5	156	WR	Jamari Thrash
6	206	LB	Nathaniel Watson
7	227	CB	Myles Harden

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
3	74	WR	Cedric Tillman
3	98	DT	Siaki Ika
4	111	OT	Dawand Jones
4	126	DE	Isaiah McGuire
5	140	QB	Dorian Thompson-Robinson

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
3	68	CB	Martin Emerson
3	78	DE	Alex Wright
3	99	WR	David Bell
4	108	DT	Perrion Winfrey
4	124	K	Cade York

INT. Sanders racked up 364 passing yards against the Titans in a losing effort in Week 14, but in his other five starts, he failed to crack the 200 passing yards mark. Heading into 2026 training camp, Sanders should have the upper hand over Gabriel, but the big question mark is Watson. He is expected to be fully healthy, and by all indications the starting job appears up for grabs.

Whoever ends up under center will have his work cut out for him. We already outlined the offensive line issues when discussing the rushing offense. But the WR position is also thin. Jerry Jeudy is the team's WR1, and while he has shown flashes during his time with the Broncos and Browns, he hasn't produced on a consistent basis. Isaiah Bond has a ton of speed, but it didn't lead to much production as he only managed 338 yards and failed to hit paydirt. Cedric Tillman also turned in similar production. But rookie tight end Harold Fannin turned into a legitimate weapon. Fannin even out-targeted Jeudy 107-106, and racked up a team-high 731 receiving yards. He also led the team with six receiving scores. Fellow tight end David Njoku left the team in free agency, so there's still room for more production if the rest of the offense can make some improvements.

Whether its Sanders, Watson or even Gabriel under center, they'll need better protection from the new offensive line to have a fighting chance. They also hope draft pick KC Concepcion can bring playmaking at wide receiver. If those two things happen, then there's room for optimism that this offense can start to take some steps in the right direction.

RUN DEFENSE

While the Browns had a wide array of issues on offense, their defense more than held their own, especially when you factor in they were playing from behind so often. The Browns were 16th in the league in rushing yards allowed with 1,979.

While Garrett got most of the headlines for the Browns' defensive unit in 2025 thanks to his pass rushing exploits, he also excelled against the run. He graded out at 82.5 in run defense per PFF, which was good for third among all edges. Carson Schwesinger also burst onto the scene, compiling 156 combined tackles, including 11 tackles for loss, as he earned NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year honors.

Defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz left the organization in February when he was passed over for the head coaching job in favor of Monken. Mike Rutenberg, who was most recently the defensive pass game coordinator for the Atlanta Falcons, was brought in to take the reins of the defense. The rest of the defense is largely the same unit that was on the field in 2025, but the Browns did bring in Quincy Williams, formerly of the Jets, to play weakside linebacker.

PASS DEFENSE

The Browns were back to being near the top of the league when it comes to passing defense, which is not hard to believe considering Garrett broke the all-time sack record. For the second time in three years, Garrett took home AP Defensive Player of the Year honors behind his record 23 sacks, and he won Sporting News' Defensive Player of the Year, voted on by the players, for the third consecutive year. Behind Garrett's fierce pass rush, the Browns tallied the third-most sacks in the league and also

allowed the second-fewest explosive plays. Denzel Ward continued to excel in the secondary, and the Browns made a midseason trade with the Jaguars to acquire Tyson Campbell, which paid dividends. The Browns gave up the third-fewest yards to receivers in the league and also the third-fewest passing yards overall.

The Browns also return Grant Delpit and Ronnie Hickman at the safety positions, and Myles Harden is back at nickel back. With Schwesinger and fellow 2025 rookie Mason Graham having a full season under their belts, their production should only increase in 2026 as well. But just like in 2025, it all starts up front with Garrett. The Browns reworked Garrett's new contract so that it appears to be more tradeable, but the organization claims they have no desire whatsoever to make a move. If Garrett stays in Cleveland, the Browns defense will continue to be a problem for opposing offenses.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Browns decided to go with rookie Andre Szmyt at kicker, and he did a solid job, connecting on 24-of-27 field goal attempts, including going 5-for-6 on 50-plus yarders. He also had a 96.2 percent extra point percentage, going 25-for-26. The punting game was another story, though. While Corey Bojorquez graded out 10th in the league among punters per PFF, the punt coverage team was a disaster, allowing the most return yards in the league. The Browns also allowed two return touchdowns in 2025, tied for last in the league.

BOTTOM LINE

Things won't turn around overnight for the Browns, and 2026 will likely be filled with growing pains as a new regime takes over. The defense should be a very good unit once again with the potential to be top-five if it can get some edge help opposite Garrett. The offense is still in flux, though. The Browns have to figure out what their plan is going to be long-term at QB, and then surround their choice with some legit weapons. Judkins gives the backfield some juice, but the passing game has to come into its own.

Myles Garrett

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Todd Monken
Former Ravens offensive coordinator, 2023–25
Former Georgia offensive coordinator, 2020–22
Offensive coordinator: Travis Switzer
Defensive coordinator: Mike Rutenberg
Special teams coordinator: Byron Storer

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Pass game coordinator: Danny Breyer
Quarterbacks: Mike Bajakian
Assistant quarterbacks: Matt Baker
Running backs: Duce Staley
Wide receivers: Christian Jones
Assistant wide receivers: John Wozniak
Tight ends/run game coordinator: Jeff Blasko
Offensive line: George Warhop
Assistant offensive line: Bobby Johnson

DEFENSE

Defensive passing game coordinator: Ephraim Banda
Defensive line: Jacques Cesaire
Assistant defensive line: Ralph Street
Linebackers/run game coordinator: Jason Tarver
Defensive backs/pass game specialist: Brandon Lynch
Senior defensive assistant: Dom Capers
Defensive assistant/nickelbacks: Jeff Anderson
Defensive assistant/assistant linebackers: Zach Dunn
Defensive quality control: Paul Worrilow

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	5–12	29.4%	2–4	3–5	2–6
2024–25	3–14	17.7%	2–4	2–6	1–8
2023–24	11–7	61.1%	3–3	8–1	3–6
2022–23	7–10	41.2%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2021–22	8–9	47.1%	3–3	6–3	2–6
2020–21	12–6	66.7%	4–3	6–2	6–4
2019–20	6–10	37.5%	3–3	4–4	2–6
2018–19	7–8–1	46.7%	3–2–1	5–2–1	2–6
2017–18	0–16	0.0%	0–6	0–7	0–8
2016–17	1–15	6.3%	0–6	1–7	0–8
2015–16	3–13	18.8%	1–5	2–6	1–7
2014–15	7–9	43.8%	2–4	4–4	3–5
2013–14	4–12	25.0%	2–4	3–5	1–7
2012–13	5–11	31.3%	2–4	4–4	1–7
2011–12	4–12	25.0%	0–6	3–5	1–7
2010–11	5–11	31.3%	1–5	3–5	2–6
2009–10	5–11	31.3%	1–5	3–5	2–6
2008–09	4–12	25.0%	1–5	1–7	3–5
2007–08	10–6	62.5%	3–3	7–1	3–5
2006–07	4–12	25.0%	0–6	2–6	2–6

Pittsburgh Steelers

Despite making the playoffs for the 13th time in 19 seasons, Mike Tomlin decided to step down after the Steelers were eliminated from the postseason by the Houston Texans. Tomlin was the seventh-longest tenured head coach in NFL history, but despite a proven track record of getting to the postseason, the Steelers' last playoff victory came in 2017. Tomlin's job status had become a hot topic in recent years, and now it's time for a new era of Steelers football as former Packers and Cowboys coach Mike McCarthy takes over.

While there has been a good amount of arrivals and departures among the Steelers' bench players, most of the starters return with a couple of potential upgrades. Pittsburgh swung a trade with the Colts to bring in WR Michael Pittman Jr. and signed him to a three-year extension. The added depth at WR should help open things up in the passing game, giving secondaries more than just DK Metcalf to worry about. The Steelers still have plenty of firepower on defense, behind T.J. Watt, Cameron Heyward, Payton Wilson and Jalen Ramsey, and they also added Jamel Dean at cornerback in free agency.

RUNNING GAME

Even though he was voted as the team's MVP by Steelers players, Pittsburgh let running back Kenneth Gainwell walk in free agency as he signed a two-year deal with Tampa Bay. While Gainwell had a nice season, especially catching passes out of the backfield, the Steelers should still have a solid running game. Jaylen Warren is coming off a career season in which he just missed eclipsing the 1,000-yard mark with 958 yards rushing and six touchdowns. While Gainwell led the team in catches out of the backfield with 73, Warren had 40 of his own, tacking on two more scores. Rather than lean on Warren to take on a larger load in 2025, though, the Steelers signed Rico Dowdle via free agency to a two-year deal.

Dowdle is coming off his second straight 1,000-plus yards season, last year with the Panthers and with the Cowboys in 2024. He added 39 catches for another 297 yards and a touchdown, while he also hit paydirt six times running the rock. While the previous Steelers regime loved to employ a ground and pound rushing attack whenever

DK Metcalf

possible, McCarthy historically runs a more West Coast–style of scheme with more balance between the running and passing games. While it's not likely that Pittsburgh morphs into a pass-heavy offense overnight, it's fair to expect more of a hybrid of the two styles. McCarthy is also very familiar with Dowdle from his time with the Cowboys, so he should instantly be a good fit for what the new head coach has in mind.

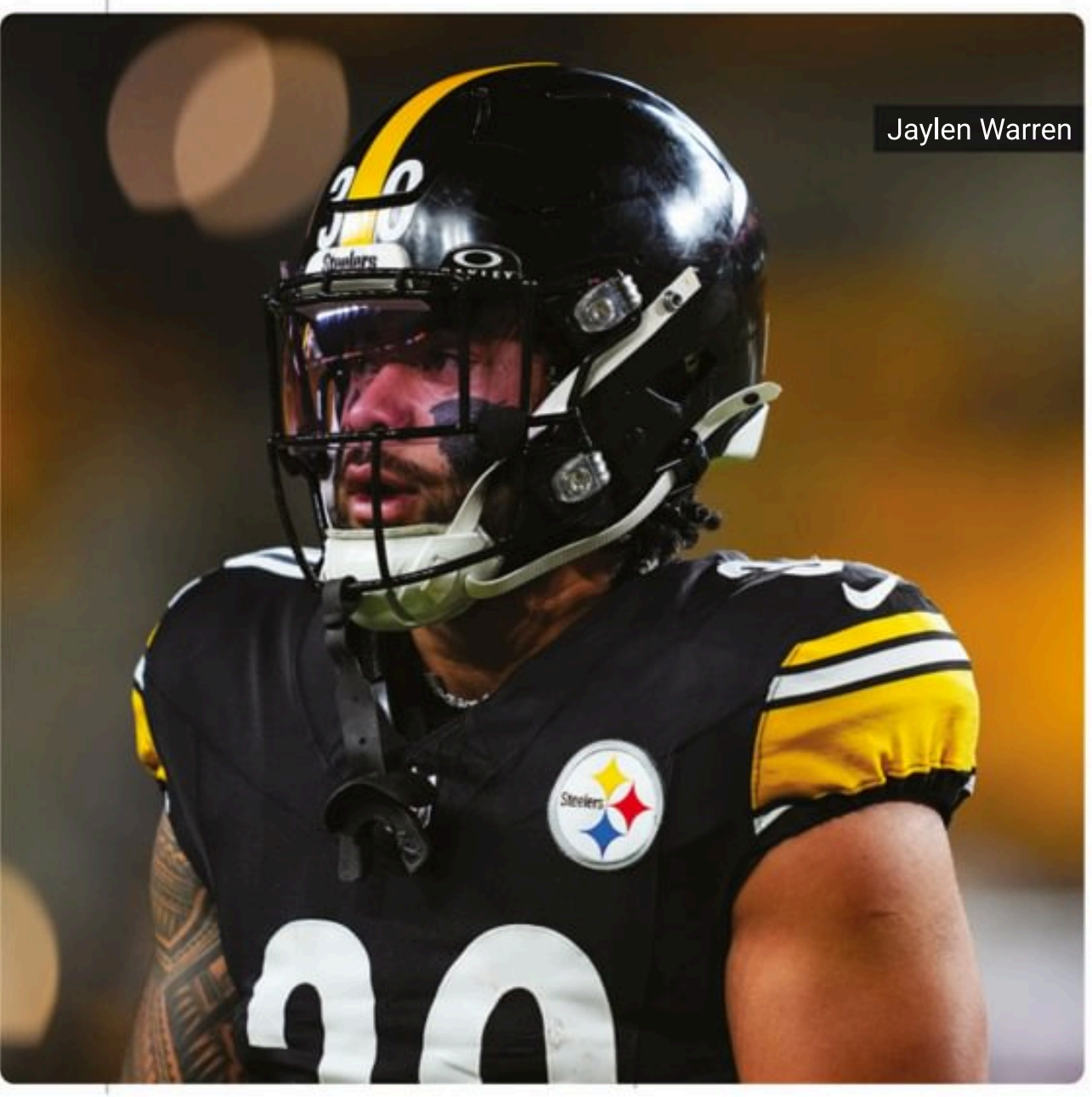
Behind the 1-2 punch at the top of the depth chart, the Steelers also brought in Travis Homer and still have Kaleb Johnson, who's coming off a disappointing rookie campaign. Many had high hopes for Johnson last season, but he could never get out of the doghouse with poor pass-blocking and special teams play. With a new regime, perhaps he'll be able to come in with a fresh start and start living up to his original expectations.

For many years, one of the knocks on the Steelers in terms of team-building, was a lack of resources being funneled towards the offensive line. But Pittsburgh has been turning things around lately in that regard, and the Steelers ranked third in Pro Football Network's OL Impact score, behind just the Rams and Bears. They also finished the year as PFF's eighth-ranked unit overall. Center Zach Frazier, guard Mason McCormick and tackle Troy Fautanu played every game together last season in just their second years in the league. Keeping that continuity, there's room for the young core to keep improving.

PASSING GAME

Aaron Rodgers is expected to return for one more season, which would reunite him with McCarthy after their era ended in 2018. The two did manage to climb the NFL summit together, ironically defeating the Steelers in Super Bowl 45 in 2011. Rodgers lit up Pittsburgh for 304 yards and three touchdowns on his way to earning Super Bowl MVP honors. Rodgers followed that up with a 15-1 regular season record the following season, and also won his first of four NFL MVP awards. They were 125-77-2 together, and while the relationship soured over their last few years, they both credit each other for helping build their legacies.

Rodgers will turn 43 in December, but the veteran is coming off


Jaylen Warren

by Ed Williams

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	ATLANTA FALCONS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at New England Patriots	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	CINCINNATI BENGALS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 1	at Cleveland Browns	8:15 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	vs. New Orleans Saints (in Paris)	9:30 a.m.
8	Nov. 1	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
9		BYE WEEK	
10	Nov. 15	at Cincinnati Bengals	8:20 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Philadelphia Eagles	4:25 p.m.
12	Nov. 27	DENVER BRONCOS	3:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	HOUSTON TEXANS	8:20 p.m.
14	Dec. 14	at Jacksonville Jaguars	8:15 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	BALTIMORE RAVENS	1:00 p.m.
16	TBD	CAROLINA PANTHERS	TBD
17	Jan. 3	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at Baltimore Ravens	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Mason Rudolph	Will Howard
RB	Jaylen Warren	Rico Dowdle
WR	DK Metcalf	Roman Wilson
WR	Michael Pittman Jr.	Kaden Wetjen
WR	Germie Bernard	Ben Skowronek
TE	Pat Freiermuth	Darnell Washington
LT	Broderick Jones	Dylan Cook
LG	Spencer Anderson	Gennings Dunker
C	Zach Frazier	Brock Hoffman
RG	Mason McCormick	Sataoa Laumea
RT	Troy Fautanu	Max Iheanachor

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Derrick Harmon	Sebastian Joseph-Day
NT	Keeanu Benton	Yahya Black
RDE	Cameron Heyward	Esezi Otomewo
WLB	T.J. Watt	Jack Sawyer
LILB	Malik Harrison	Cole Holcomb
RILB	Patrick Queen	Payton Wilson
SLB	Alex Highsmith	Nick Herbig
LCB	Joey Porter Jr.	Asante Samuel Jr.
SS	DeShon Elliott	Sebastian Castro
FS	Jaquan Brisker	Darnell Savage
RCB	Jamel Dean	Daylen Everette

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Chris Boswell	Cameron Johnston

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	21	T	Max Iheanachor
2	47	WR	Germie Bernard
3	76	QB	Drew Allar
3	85	CB	Daylen Everette
3	96	T	Gennings Dunker

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	21	DT	Derrick Harmon
3	83	RB	Kaleb Johnson
4	123	DE	Jack Sawyer
5	164	DT	Yahya Black
6	185	QB	Will Howard

2024

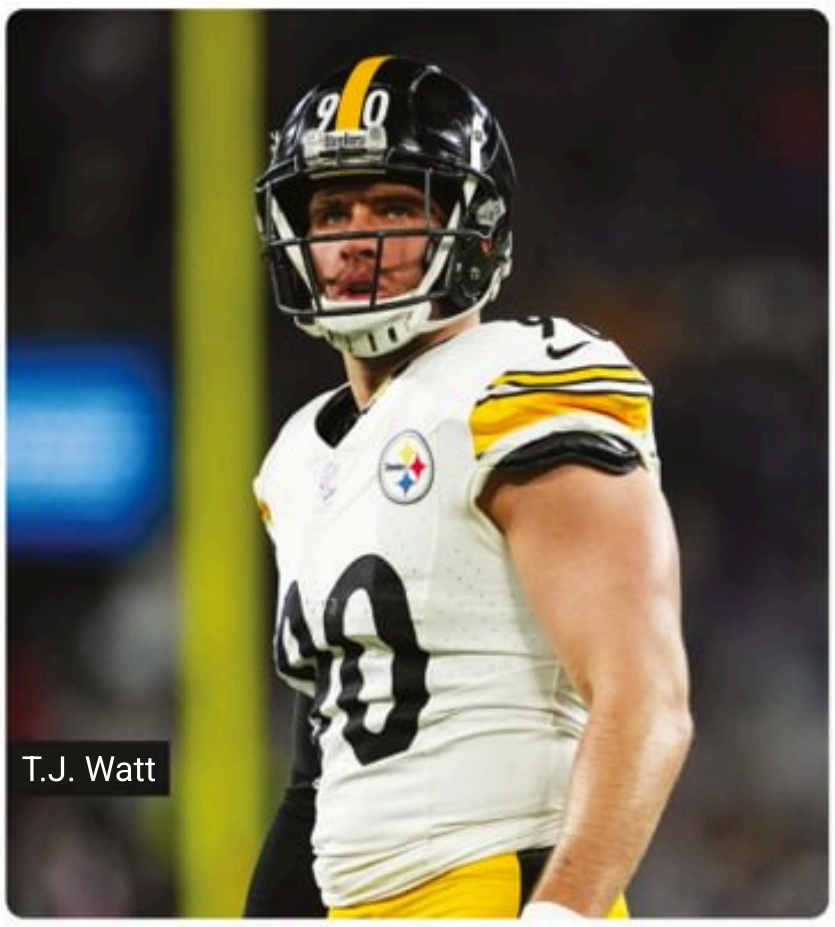
Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	20	OL	Troy Fautanu
2	51	C	Zach Frazier
3	84	WR	Roman Wilson
3	98	LB	Payton Wilson
4	119	G	Mason McCormick

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	14	OT	Broderick Jones
2	32	CB	Joey Porter Jr.
2	49	DT	Keeanu Benton
3	92	TE	Darnell Washington
4	132	LB	Nick Herbig

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	20	QB	Kenny Pickett
2	52	WR	George Pickens
3	84	DE	DeMarvin Leal
4	138	WR	Calvin Austin
6	208	FB	Connor Heyward



T.J. Watt

a solid, if unspectacular, season with the Steelers. Rodgers threw for 3,322 yards with a 65.7 completion percentage, and he connected on 24 touchdowns while tossing seven interceptions. While Rodgers did have Metcalf as his primary target in 2025, the Steelers lacked other standout weapons in the passing game, which helped pave the way for big receiving years from the running backs. But Pittsburgh made a bit of a splash, trading for the Colts' Pittman Jr. to complement the imposing Metcalf.

Metcalf managed to put up 850 yards and six touchdowns last season, but with Pittman giving defenses another wrinkle to gameplan for, he could see more open looks in 2026. His 850 yards last year was his lowest total of his career, and at just 28 years old, there's reason to think there's room for him to get back to his peak numbers in McCarthy's system. While Pittman had his best season in 2023, he had a solid campaign with the Colts last year, corralling 80 balls for 784 yards and seven touchdowns. Roman Wilson and Ben Skowronek are likely the next men up on the depth chart, but the team also drafted Germie Bernard. Tight end Jonnu Smith was released, but the Steelers had a ton of depth at the position. Darnell Washington and Pat Freiermuth still remain, continuing to give Pittsburgh a solid 1-2 punch at the position.

The passing game is where the offensive line excelled the most in 2025. The Steelers ranked second in the NFL with an 88.8 percent pass blocking efficiency rating, per PFF, allowing 117 pressures over almost 600 snaps. Guard Isaac Seumalo left in free agency, but the rest of the unit remains together, which is good news for Rodgers. There are plenty of things to be excited about heading into this season as opposed to the grinding offenses of the Tomlin era, but there are still a couple of weaknesses to worry about. Rodgers' age and health will always be a concern until he decides to call it a career. And as mentioned before, Rodgers and McCarthy didn't end their Packers tenure together on the best terms, so will they be able to recapture their Super Bowl magic? The offense lacks some field-stretching speed, but the switch to McCarthy's scheme leaves room for optimism that Pittsburgh can turn things around.

RUN DEFENSE

The McCarthy era also brings with it a new defensive coordinator. Teryl Austin's contract expired, and the Steelers brought in Patrick Graham, who had spent the last four years with the Raiders in the same position. He has experience with both 4-3 and 3-4 schemes, but all signs point to him sticking with Pittsburgh's familiar 3-4 front. Heyward is getting up there in age at 37, but he remains an elite run defender and was a team captain last season.

The Steelers drafted Derrick Harmon in 2025—he had an impressive rookie year. He missed some games due to injury, but there was a stark contrast between the rushing numbers when he played vs. when he was inactive. The Steelers gave up an average of 165.6 yards per game when Harmon was out, but that number shrunk to 91.2 yards when he was active. Even if Heyward starts to lose a step, Harmon should only keep improving. And while Watt makes the most noise with his sacks, he remains a stellar run defender and does a great job setting the edge for the defense. Patrick Queen and Wilson give the Steelers great speed at the linebacker positions, but they struggle at times to get off blocks.

PASS DEFENSE

Behind Watt, the Steelers are known for their pass-rushing ability, but the backend of the defense struggled at times last season. With a high blitz rate in 2025, the secondary was left vulnerable at times. But Pittsburgh fortified the back end of the defense in the offseason. Joey Porter Jr. didn't allow a touchdown last year, and the Steelers brought in Dean to pair with him, giving them one of the league's strongest 1-2 punches at CB. Ramsey and DeShon Elliott both can move around the field a bit, giving the team some versatility. Jabrill Peppers departed, but the Steelers brought in Jaquan Brisker to shore up the safety position.

Watt, who dealt with a partially collapsed lung late in the year after a dry needling treatment session, was held to just seven sacks on the season. But the Steelers still managed to rank fourth in pass-rush grade, per PFF, and were sixth in total sacks with 48. It was just three seasons ago that Watt racked up 19 sacks, so there's still room for the pass rush to improve in 2026, even after a strong 2025. In addition to being susceptible to coverage busts off the high blitz rate, the Steelers really struggled to cover the tight end position, allowing 11 receiving scores, which was near the bottom of the league. This is another area where Queen and Wilson will need to step up and improve for 2026.

Derrick Harmon

SPECIAL TEAMS

Danny Smith departs after 13 seasons serving as special teams coordinator, and Danny Crossman comes over from the Dolphins to take over. Pittsburgh returns one of the game's best kickers in Chris Boswell. The 12-year vet went 27-of-32 on field goal attempts, including going 9-of-11 on 50-plus yarders and a long of 60 yards. He only missed one extra point on the year, going 42-for-43. Corliss Waitman took over punting duties from Cameron Johnston in 2025, but the Steelers let him walk in free agency and decided to bring back Johnston.

BOTTOM LINE

While McCarthy has seen a good amount of success in getting his teams to the playoffs, reaching the postseason 12 times in 18 seasons, he hasn't had a playoff victory since 2022. And he hasn't been to a conference championship game since 2016. If McCarthy's scheme and the addition of Pittman can open up the passing offense, and the secondary can play more consistently, then the Steelers can stay in the AFC North hunt all season, but it's a crowded division. The Ravens and Bengals should be right there with them in a three-team race.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Mike McCarthy
Former Cowboys head coach, 2020–24
Former Packers head coach, 2006–18
Offensive coordinator: Brian Angelichio
Defensive coordinator: Patrick Graham
Special teams coordinator: Danny Crossman

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Tom Arth
Running backs: Ramon Chinyoung
Wide receivers: Adam Henry
Tight ends: Robert Kugler
Offensive line: James Campen
Assistant offensive line: Jahri Evans
Game management/quarterbacks: Tim Berbenich
Senior offensive assistant: Frank Cignetti Jr.
Offensive quality control: Eric Simonelli

DEFENSE

Defensive coordinator: Patrick Graham
Defensive line: Domata Peko
Outside linebackers: C.J. Ah You
Inside linebackers: Scott McCurley
Pass game coordinator/defensive backs: Jason Simmons
Defensive assistant: Shawn Howe
Defensive assistant: Pat Reilly

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	10–8	55.6%	4–2	5–4	4–4
2024–25	10–8	55.6%	3–4	5–3	5–5
2023–24	10–8	55.6%	5–1	5–4	5–4
2022–23	9–8	52.9%	3–3	4–4	5–4
2021–22	9–8–1	52.9%	4–2	6–2–1	3–6
2020–21	12–5	70.6%	4–3	7–2	5–3
2019–20	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–5
2018–19	9–6–1	60.0%	4–1–1	5–3	4–3–1
2017–18	13–4	76.5%	6–0	6–3	7–1
2016–17	13–6	68.4%	5–1	7–2	6–4
2015–16	11–7	61.1%	4–3	6–2	5–5
2014–15	11–6	64.7%	4–3	6–3	5–3
2013–14	8–8	50.0%	4–2	5–3	3–4
2012–13	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–5
2011–12	12–5	70.6%	4–2	7–1	5–4
2010–11	14–5	73.7%	6–1	7–3	7–1
2009–10	9–7	56.3%	2–4	6–2	3–5
2008–09	15–4	79.0%	7–0	8–2	6–2
2007–08	10–7	58.8%	5–1	7–2	3–5
2006–07	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–5

C.J. Stroud

Houston Texans

Texans head coach DeMeco Ryans has overseen the best three-year stretch in the 24-year history of the franchise, including a 12-5 record in 2025. And he's got all the major pieces to build a winner again in his fourth season at the helm. The one spell Ryans hasn't broken is the Texans' record of futility in the Divisional playoffs. Each of his first three squads has won by at least 20 points in the Wild Card round against the Cleveland Browns, Los Angeles Chargers and Pittsburgh Steelers. Unfortunately, they've followed each of those wins with losses of at least nine points to the Baltimore Ravens, Kansas City Chiefs and New England Patriots in those pesky Divisionals.

It continues a trend that dates to Houston's first playoff run in 2011, when they beat the Cincinnati Bengals handily, 31-10, in a Wild Card matchup before losing, 20-13, to the Ravens. In fact, in nine trips to the AFC playoffs, the Texans have won seven Wild Card games only to fall in the Divisional round—all of them coming on the road. If defense wins championships, however, the Texans have the group to do it after finishing No. 1 in the league in total defense and second in scoring defense. But if offense wins games, the Texans can only hope they've finally constructed a unit capable of winning on the biggest stages.

RUNNING GAME

Nick Caley enters his second season as Houston's offensive coordinator after directing the league's No. 18 total offense and No. 13 scoring offense in his debut. Improvement will have to be made in the running game for Caley's offense to truly take flight. The Texans' ground game ranked 22nd employing an ensemble approach with rookie Woody Marks in the lead role with 196 totes for 703 yards and two touchdowns. Marks started eight games as the feature back with Nick Chubb logging the other nine starts while running for 506 yards and three scores on 122 carries. But Chubb wasn't retained, leaving quarterback C.J. Stroud as the second-leading returning rusher with 48 carries for 209 yards. Jawhar Jordan (43-193 yards) was a distant third among the running backs.

None of that added up to the kind of rushing attack that can win consistently in the postseason, and the Texans paid a visit to the Motor City and kicked the tires on David Montgomery. They ended up sending two picks and a spare offensive lineman (Juice Scruggs) to the Detroit Lions to acquire Montgomery, who will be 29 by the time the season kicks off. The offensive line is likely to feature some newcomers in starting roles, too. Guard Wyatt Teller was acquired from the Cleveland Browns and right tackle Braden Smith is on board after spending his first eight seasons with the Indianapolis Colts. Several holdovers also return, including Aireontae Ersery, who established himself as a potential future star at left tackle—that is, if he can clean up his game after being flagged for 13 penalties as a rookie. Center Jake Andrews is back after starting 16 games in that role. The Browns also used a first-round pick to draft Keylan Rutledge, who is expected to start at left guard.

PASSING GAME

The changes upfront are part of an effort to provide even better protection for their chief asset—fourth-year quarterback Stroud. Ersery is a key piece of that plan as Stroud's primary protector, and the hope remains that the

young quarterback can post the kind of numbers he produced during his prolific 2023 rookie season. Stroud threw for 4,108 yards with 23 touchdowns and five interceptions that season, but after missing three games a year ago, his yardage and touchdown totals were the lowest of his young career.

He barely topped 3,000 yards (3,041), although he likely would have been close to his 2024 totals if not for the missed games. He did improve his accuracy slightly, and his quarterback rating overall was up—a partial reflection of the fact that he was also better at protecting the ball. He threw just eight interceptions without losing any fumbles one year after being responsible for 14 turnovers. The Texans exercised their fifth-year option on Stroud in early April, so he's the man through at least 2027.

There's also the sense, however, that he needs to take that next big leap forward, even with two division titles and three straight playoff trips in his first three seasons. And while this might not be a make-or-break season, it does feel like one that could figure into the team's decision-making beyond 2026—especially if the Texans take a step backward. Exercising that option feels like a no-brainer, but if Stroud doesn't make some significant strides this fall, the Texans will have to decide whether he's the long-term answer as the team's franchise quarterback.

His receiving options will mostly be the same as last year with the top five players in yards back for another run in Houston. Nico Collins is the top hand when it comes to stretching the field with 71 catches for 1,117 yards and six scores. Help is provided by Jayden Higgins (41-525, 6 TDs), Xavier Hutchinson (35-428, 3 TDs), and Jaylin Noel (26-292, 2 TDs). Dalton Schultz, meanwhile, was the team's leader in overall receptions with 82 for 777 yards. Tank Dell also returns after missing all of last season with a serious knee injury.

RUN DEFENSE

The Texans' hang their hats on the league's top-ranked defense, and make no mistake about it, this unit was elite. Defensive coordinator Matt Burke's platoon yielded just

Woody Marks

by Kendall Webb

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	BUFFALO BILLS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	CINCINNATI BENGALS	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Indianapolis Colts	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	DALLAS COWBOYS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	vs. Jacksonville (in London)	9:30 a.m.
7	Oct. 25	NEW YORK GIANTS	1:00 p.m.
8		BYE WEEK	
9	Nov. 8	at Los Angeles Chargers	4:05 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Cleveland Browns	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 19	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	8:15 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	BALTIMORE RAVENS	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Pittsburgh Steelers	8:20 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Washington Commanders	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 24	at Philadelphia Eagles	8:15 p.m.
17	Jan. 4	at Green Bay Packers	8:15 p.m.
18	TBD	TENNESSEE TITANS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	C.J. Stroud	Davis Mills
RB	David Montgomery	Woody Marks
WR	Nico Collins	Xavier Hutchinson
WR	Jayden Higgins	Jaylin Noel
WR	Tank Dell	Justin Watson
TE	Dalton Schultz	Marlin Klein
LT	Aireontae Ersery	Blake Fisher
LG	Keylan Rutledge	Evan Brown
C	Jake Andrews	Eli Cox
RG	Wyatt Teller	Ed Ingram
RT	Braden Smith	Trent Brown

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Will Anderson Jr.	Dylan Horton
LDT	Tommy Togiai	Logan Hall
RDT	Sheldon Rankins	Kayden McDonald
RDE	Danielle Hunter	Dominique Robinson
WLB	Henry To'oTo'o	Marte Mapu
MLB	Azeez Al-Shaair	Wade Woodaz
SLB	E.J. Speed	Jamal Hill
LCB	Derek Stingley Jr.	Tremon Smith
SS	Reed Blankenship	M.J. Stewart
FS	Calen Bullock	Jaylen Reed
RCB	Kamari Lassiter	Jaylin Smith

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Ka'imi Fairbairn	Kai Kroeger

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	26	G	Keylan Rutledge
2	36	DT	Kayden McDonald
2	59	TE	Marlin Klein
4	106	G	Febechi Nwaiwu
4	123	LB	Wade Woodaz

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	34	WR	Jayden Higgins
2	48	OT	Aireontae Ersery
3	79	WR	Jaylin Noel
3	97	CB	Jaylin Smith
4	116	RB	Woody Marks

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	42	CB	Kamari Lassiter
2	59	T	Blake Fisher
3	78	S	Calen Bullock
4	123	TE	Cade Stover
6	188	LB	Jamal Hill

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	2	QB	C.J. Stroud
1	3	EDGE	Will Anderson
2	62	C	Juice Scruggs
4	109	EDGE	Dylan Horton
5	167	LB	Henry To'oTo'o

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	3	CB	Derek Stingley Jr.
1	15	OG	Kenyon Green
2	37	S	Jalen Pitre
2	44	WR	John Metchie III
3	75	LB	Christian Harris

Will Anderson Jr.

277.2 yards per game, and they were ranked in the top seven in both pass defense and run defense—they surrendered just 93.7 yards per game on the ground. They were even in the top seven in both third-down (6th, 36.2%) and fourth-down efficiency (7th, 47.6%), and if there was any bone to pick with Burke's defense, it would be the fact they were flagged for the seventh-most penalties (118-989 yards). Three members of the platoon were named to the various All-Pro teams, with recognition showered upon defensive ends Will Anderson Jr. and Danielle Hunter along with cornerback Derek Stingley Jr.

There might not be a better tandem at the edges in the NFL than the rocket-fueled rush of Anderson and Hunter in the Space City. Both are elite defenders in rushing and passing situations, and last year, they combined for 35 tackles for loss, with Anderson logging 20 on his own. That was tied for fourth overall in the league while Hunter's 15 was tied for eighth. The interior, meanwhile, is in the capable hands of Tommy Togiai (6 TFLs) and Sheldon Rankins (5 TFLs). Azeez Al-Shaair, meanwhile, has developed into one of the league's best middle linebackers, leading the team with 103 tackles. His presence frees up his unit mates to go make plays, and he's got a couple of productive friends in Henry To'oTo'o (95 tackles, 9 TFLs) and E.J. Speed (62 tackles).

PASS DEFENSE

As good as the Texans' run defense was, the pass defense was even a notch better in the final rankings, checking as the league's sixth-stingiest unit. And digging deeper into the numbers provides even more evidence of how truly special they were. The Texans were one of just four units to hold opposing passers under 60 percent for the season, checking in at third with a completion percentage of just 59.3 percent. They were seventh-best in yards per pass attempt (6.5), tied for seventh in touchdown passes allowed (20) and third in interceptions (19). That yielded the second-best touchdown-to-interception ratio in the league, ranking only behind the Chargers, who were the only team to have more interceptions (19) than touchdown passes allowed (16).

And the good news for the Texans is, all the major contributors are back. Once again, it starts up front where Anderson and Hunter are two of the league's premier sack artists. Hunter pulled down 15 quarterbacks in the backfield while Anderson bagged another 12 as the Texans finished tied for seventh with 47 sacks as a team. The linebacking unit contributed in various ways with To'oTo'o adding 2.5 sacks while Al-Shaair was more effective in coverage with nine passes defended. And the secondary was a case of "pick your poison" for opposing offenses trying to find a weak spot. The four individual starters finished tied for the team lead with four interceptions apiece, including the unit's resident All-Pro, Stingley (15 PDs). Statistically, the other corner, Kamari Lassiter, was at least his equal (17 PDs), and safeties Jalen Pitre (12 PDs) and Calen Bullock (10 PDs)

formed a dynamic duo of their own. Somehow, the Texans may have even got better here with the addition of free agent Reed Blankenship from the Philadelphia Eagles.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Noel was the primary return specialist on kickoffs (29-799, 27.6 avg.) and punts (31-335, 10.8 avg.) although cornerback Tremon Smith chipped in on kick returns (18-435, 24.2 avg.). Both can ably carry the extra load required in their secondary roles. Kicker Ka'imi Fairbairn missed two games to injury and still managed to tie the all-time NFL season record for field goals made with 44 in 48 attempts. His 87.6% career conversion rate is the seventh-best of all-time, and he was also perfect on PATs for just the second time in his career. In return, the Texans made him the highest-paid kicker in NFL history with a new two-year, $13 million deal this spring. Punter Tommy Townsend is now with Tennessee, so the Texans traded for New Orleans punter Kai Kroeger (56-2,511, 44.8 avg.).

BOTTOM LINE

Considering Houston's historical struggles in the Divisional Playoffs, maybe the answer for Ryans and his staff is finding a way to avoid the Wild Card round altogether. But that, of course, requires being the No. 1 overall seed to earn a bye, and that's a tough chore in a loaded AFC. The next best thing then is clinching the No. 2 seed to guarantee home games in both the Wild Card and Divisional rounds, and that, in fact, should absolutely be the minimum goal for this edition of the Texans. It won't be easy in a division where the Texans contended with a resurgent Jacksonville after chasing down an Indianapolis squad that was tied for the best record in the AFC a year ago through 10 games at 8-2. But somehow, these Texans must figure out how to finish as the division champions to have a chance at that No. 2 seed.

Ka'imi Fairbairn

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: DeMeco Ryans
First season with Texans: 2023
Regular-season record with Texans: 32–19 (62.7%)
Offensive coordinator: Nick Caley
Defensive coordinator: Matt Burke
Special teams coordinator: Frank Ross

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Jerry Schuplinski
Assistant head coach/running backs: Danny Barrett
Wide receivers/passing game coordinator: Ben McDaniels
Tight ends: James Ferentz
Offensive line/run game coordinator: Cole Popovich
Offensive assistant: Alex Ward
Offensive assistant: Cole Weeks
Offensive assistant: Asauni Rufus
Offensive assistant: Taylor Embree

DEFENSE

Defensive passing game coordinator: Cory Undlin
Defensive line/run game coordinator: Rod Wright
Assistant defensive line: Frank Okam
Linebackers: Billy Davis
Defensive backs: Dino Vasso
Safeties: Stephen Adegoke
Senior defensive assistant: Bill Lazor
Defensive assistant: Mark Sheridan
Defensive assistant: Jay Simpson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	13–6	68.4%	5–1	7–2	6–4
2024–25	11–8	57.9%	5–1	6–3	5–5
2023–24	11–8	57.9%	4–2	7–3	4–5
2022–23	3–13–1	18.8%	3–2–1	0–7–1	3–6
2021–22	4–13	23.5%	3–3	2–7	2–6
2020–21	4–12	25.0%	2–4	2–6	2–6
2019–20	11–7	61.1%	4–2	6–3	4–4
2018–19	11–6	64.7%	4–3	6–3	5–3
2017–18	4–12	25.0%	1–5	3–5	1–7
2016–17	10–8	55.6%	5–1	8–1	2–6
2015–16	9–8	52.9%	5–1	5–4	4–4
2014–15	9–7	56.3%	4–2	5–3	4–4
2013–14	2–14	12.5%	1–5	1–7	1–7
2012–13	13–5	72.2%	5–1	7–2	6–3
2011–12	11–7	61.1%	4–2	6–3	5–4
2010–11	6–10	37.5%	3–3	4–4	2–6
2009–10	9–7	56.3%	1–5	4–4	5–3
2008–09	8–8	50.0%	2–4	6–2	2–6
2007–08	8–8	50.0%	1–5	6–2	2–6
2006–07	6–10	37.5%	3–3	4–4	2–6

Indianapolis Colts

Indianapolis was sitting alone atop the AFC standings at the end of October with a resurgent Daniel Jones leading the way at quarterback. The former New York Giant had signed a one-year, $14 million deal last March. But then the wheels started to come off down the back stretch of the season, and by the end, it was an ugly scene even for a city that's accustomed to spectacular crashes at the local speedway. Indianapolis lost, 27-20, at Pittsburgh to start November, before narrowly escaping with a 31-25 win over a middle-of-the-road Falcons squad.

That had the Colts sitting at 8-2, but that would prove to be the final win of the season. Making matters worse, in Week 14 at Jacksonville on Dec. 7, they suffered what would turn out to be their biggest loss of the season when Jones went down with an Achilles injury. The Colts ended up finishing the season on a seven-game slide, but they saw enough in Jones to slap the transition tag on him in March. Days later, he signed a two-year, $88 million extension, and he's set to return along with several other major stars who suffered injuries in 2025. The Colts hope to get out of the gate quickly again, but this time, they have their sights set on finishing the race.

RUNNING GAME

For a team that was hammered by injuries across the board, but especially at the quarterback position, Indianapolis was still remarkably competent on offense under offensive coordinator Jim Bob Cooter. The Colts, of course, have one of the league's elite running backs in All-Pro Jonathan Taylor, and they leaned heavily on their workhorse. He posted the second-highest load of his career with 323 carries for 1,585 yards while equaling his career high in rushing touchdowns with 18. Through his first six seasons as a pro, Taylor has piled up 7,598 yards, and he's maintained a 4.9-yard average per carry. At his

Jonathan Taylor

by Kendall Webb

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	BALTIMORE RAVENS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Kansas City Chiefs	8:20 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	HOUSTON TEXANS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	vs. Washington (in London)	9:30 a.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Pittsburgh Steelers	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	TENNESSEE TITANS	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Minnesota Vikings	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Jacksonville Jaguars	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	DALLAS COWBOYS	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	MIAMI DOLPHINS	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 19	at Houston Texans	8:15 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	NEW YORK GIANTS	1:00 p.m.
13		BYE WEEK	
14	Dec. 13	at Philadelphia Eagles	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
16	TBD	CINCINNATI BENGALS	TBD
17	Jan. 3	at Cleveland Browns	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	TBD

current pace, he only needs 27 more games to join the elite list of 32 running backs to date that have rushed for more than 10,000 career yards.

Jones, meanwhile, was the team's second-leading rusher (45-164, 5 TDs) from the quarterback position, and to the extent that the Colts used a backup to Taylor, it was DJ Giddens and Ameer Abdullah combining for 40 of the remaining 50 carries by running backs on the roster. Giddens is back, but Abdullah wasn't immediately re-signed. Of course, even a bell cow back like Taylor needs some quality help up front, and he got it in the form of fellow All-Pro left guard Quenton Nelson, who is also on a Hall of Fame trajectory. Nelson has been selected to the Pro Bowl in each of his eight seasons—six of which have also included All-Pro designation, with three first-team selections on his resume. He's undeniably the best offensive lineman on an otherwise solid unit that includes center Tanor Bortolini, left tackle Bernhard Raimann and right guard Matt Goncalves. There is one gap where long-time right tackle Braden Smith left during free agency to sign with Houston. Second-year man Jalen Travis is his likely replacement.

PASSING GAME

That offensive line unit was solid in pass protection, only giving up 29 sacks despite having three different starting quarterbacks barking out the signals. In fact, the Colts were so depleted at the position by the end of last year that they brought in 44-year-old former All-Pro quarterback Philip Rivers for a tryout and ended up signing him. It started when backup quarterback Anthony Richardson was lost for the season in a freak pregame injury on Oct. 12 when an apparatus used to attach resistance bands to a wall failed. Richardson was struck in the face, causing a serious fracture to his orbital bone. Then with the Colts having lost three out of four games, Jones was lost to that Achilles injury, and suddenly the 8-2 Colts were 8-6 without a starting quarterback.

Enter Rivers, whose previous regular-season start had occurred nearly five years earlier for Indianapolis on Jan. 3, 2021, in what had been the final regular-season game of what will someday be a Hall of Fame career. Rivers, in fact, was a semifinalist on the 2026 ballot before stepping back onto the field last Dec. 14 to help the Colts with their quarterback quandary.

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Daniel Jones	Anthony Richardson
RB	Jonathan Taylor	DJ Giddens
WR	Alec Pierce	Ashton Dulin
WR	Josh Downs	Deion Burks
WR	Nick Westbrook-Ikhine	Anthony Gould
TE	Tyler Warren	Mo Alie-Cox
LT	Bernhard Raimann	Blake Freeland
LG	Quenton Nelson	Josh Sills
C	Tanor Bortolini	Jimmy Morrissey
RG	Matt Goncalves	Jalen Farmer
RT	Jalen Travis	Bayron Matos

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	JT Tuimoloau	Micheal Clemons
LDT	Grover Stewart	Colby Wooden
RDT	DeForest Buckner	Adetomiwa Adebawore
RDE	Laiatu Latu	Arden Key
WLB	Akeem Davis-Gaither	Jaylon Carlies
MLB	CJ Allen	Austin Ajiake
SLB	John Bullock	Joseph Vaughn
LCB	Sauce Gardner	Justin Walley
SS	Juanyeh Thomas	Daniel Scott
FS	Cam Bynum	A.J. Haulcy
RCB	Charvarius Ward	Cam Taylor-Britt

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Blake Grupe	Rigoberto Sanchez

Sauce Gardner

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	53	LB	CJ Allen
3	78	S	A. J. Haulcy
4	113	G	Jalen Farmer
4	135	LB	Bryce Boettcher
5	156	DE	George Gumbs Jr.

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	14	TE	Tyler Warren
2	45	DE	JT Tuimoloau
3	80	CB	Justin Walley
4	127	OT	Jalen Travis
5	151	RB	DJ Giddens

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	15	EDGE	Laiatu Latu
2	52	WR	Adonai Mitchell
3	79	T	Matt Goncalves
4	117	C	Tanor Bortolini
5	142	WR	Anthony Gould

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	4	QB	Anthony Richardson
2	44	CB	Julius Brents
3	79	WR	Josh Downs
4	106	OT	Blake Freeland
4	110	DL	Adetomiwa Adebawore

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	53	WR	Alec Pierce
3	73	TE	Jelani Woods
3	77	OT	Bernhard Raimann
3	96	S	Nick Cross
5	159	DT	Eric Johnson

Honestly, he wasn't bad over three games, completing 58-of-92 attempts for 544 yards with four touchdowns and three interceptions. But he wasn't good enough to end the slide, and ultimately the Colts lost all three of his starts, falling out of playoff contention. Riley Leonard started the final game with Rivers returning to the bench and then to retirement with the short postscript to his career presumably in permanent ink this time.

Jones' recovery from the Achilles injury is reportedly on schedule, and he could even return in time for training camp. The Colts' receiving yards leader is back in Alec Pierce who made the most of his 47 catches, converting them into 1,003 yards and six touchdowns. Of the 20 receivers that topped the century mark last season, Pierce's 21.3 average yards per catch was 4.1 yards better than No. 2 Jameson Williams of the Lions, who averaged 17.2. Michael Pittman Jr., on the other hand, was traded to the Steelers after leading the team with 80 receptions for 784 yards and seven scores. The Colts still have wide receiver Josh Downs (58-566, 4 TDs) and tight end Tyler Warren (76-817, 4 TDs), and Taylor is also a significant contributor out of the backfield with 46 catches for 378 yards and two trips to the end zone.

RUN DEFENSE

Injuries decimated defensive coordinator Lou Anarumo's defense, too, with stalwarts like cornerbacks Sauce Gardner and Charvarius Ward combining to play just 11 games. That affected how opposing offensive coordinators attacked Anarumo's troops, and the team's run defense benefited somewhat as opponents took to the airwaves against a decimated secondary. The Colts finished the season ranked seventh against the run while fending off 627 pass attempts—second only to the 635 attempts the Jaguars faced.

That meant fewer rushing attempts, but to be fair, the Colts were also pretty stout against the run as one of only five teams to allow fewer than four yards per carry. Linebackers Zaire Franklin (125 tackles, 7 TFLs) and Germaine Pratt (101 tackles, 5 TFLs) were playmakers, and interior linemen DeForest Buckner (9 TFLs) and Adetomiwa Adebawore (5 TFLs) were also effective. Buckner missed seven games to injury, but he still managed to finish second on the team in tackles for loss. Buckner and Adebawore are back, but Franklin was traded to Green Bay after the season for defensive tackle Colby Wooden. To help offset Franklin's departure, the Colts used their second-round pick on Georgia linebacker CJ Allen, who's expected to compete for a starting job right away.

PASS DEFENSE

With the run defense doing its best to hold the line and teams looking to pick on a battered secondary, the Colts finished tied for the second-most passing yards allowed. They only finished ahead of the much-maligned Cowboys' secondary, but the Colts' numbers are also skewed somewhat by the tale of their two seasons—the 8-2 start followed by the 0-7 finish. Some teams were forced to throw more early in the season when the Colts were playing with leads, while that script was flipped down the stretch as the Colts' season collapsed. The sum of all those parts tells a story of a defense that, with its defensive backfield stars sidelined, gave up a lot of passing yards—but there are other numbers that indicate some positives.

Of the 11 teams that yielded the most passing yards, the Colts allowed the lowest completion

percentage, and their 63.3 completion rate allowed was actually 12th best in the league. They were 13th in touchdown passes allowed (24), 10th in interceptions (14), and 15th in sacks (39)—numbers that suggest they were better than the sum of their parts. They were only ranked 20th in yards per attempt allowed (7.1), however, indicating that they were more prone to giving up bigger plays. Defensive end Laiatu Latu did a good job forcing the pressure upfront with 8.5 sacks, and

Laiatu Latu

he's still around to join forces with Adebawore and Buckner again, who were active with four sacks apiece. The linebackers were often forced into coverage roles to help with the secondary shortages, and Allen should be capable enough to help in that area as a three-down linebacker.

While CBs Gardner and Ward were in the lineup together for one entire game, the safeties proved extremely durable. Cam Bynum started every game and was an all-around warrior (81 tackles, 3 TFLs, 8 PDs, 4 INTs) while Nick Cross was second in tackles with 120 stops and parlayed that into a new deal with the Commanders. Gardner, Ward and Bynum return along with valuable secondary reserves like cornerbacks Mekhi Blackmon and Kenny Moore II.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Colts were the second-best kickoff return unit in the league last season with three primary returners—Abdullah (29.6 avg.) and backup receivers Anthony Gould (25.9 avg.) and Ashton Dulin (32.3 avg.) combining to average 28.8 yards per return. Gould was also the primary punt returner with 13 opportunities for a respectable 131 yards (10.1 avg.), and he and Dulin should be able to handle the extra opportunities in the wake of Abdullah's departure. Injuries also hit the Colts' kicking unit with Spencer Shrader tearing both his ACL and MCL in Week 5. Michael Badgley and Blake Grupe got the Colts to the finish line, and collectively, the group connected on 34-of-36 field goals and 42-of-45 PATs. Schrader will compete with Grupe for the starting role in 2026.

BOTTOM LINE

Anything that could go wrong last year did down the stretch as the Colts became just the sixth team to start 7-1 and miss the playoffs since the AFL-NFL merger in 1970. That's not the kind of history you want to make, but last year's hot start with Jones under center gives Colts' fans hope that their team can compete for a playoff spot again.

It's a realistic expectation, provided that the Colts aren't bit by the injury bug again that derailed a once-promising season in 2025. As long as Taylor and Jones are healthy, the offense should be able to challenge its No. 9 rank from a season ago. But in a division with two potential Top 10 defenses in Houston and Jacksonville and a defensive-minded staff taking over at Tennessee, the Colts need their health—and maybe a little luck—to keep up with the other Joneses in their neighborhood.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Shane Steichen
First season with Colts: 2023
Regular-season record with Colts: 25–26 (49.0%)
Offensive coordinator: Jim Bob Cooter
Defensive coordinator: Lou Anarumo
Special teams coordinator: Brian Mason

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Passing game coordinator: Alex Tanney
Quarterbacks: Cameron Turner
Running backs: DeAndre Smith
Wide receivers: Reggie Wayne
Tight ends: Tom Manning
Offensive line: Tony Sparano Jr.
Assistant offensive line: Chris Watt
Offensive quality control: Diego Ortiz
Offensive quality control: Brent Stocksill

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Marion Hobby
Assistant defensive line: Kalon Humphries
Linebackers: James Bettcher
Assistant linebackers: Cato June
Pass game coordinator/secondary: Chris Hewitt
Defensive backs: Jerome Henderson
Defensive quality control: Jeremy Bruce
Defensive quality control: Dillon Doyle

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	8–9	47.1%	2–4	5–3	2–6
2024–25	8–9	47.1%	3–3	5–3	3–6
2023–24	9–8	52.9%	3–3	4–5	4–3
2022–23	4–12–1	25.0%	1–4–1	2–6	2–6–1
2021–22	9–8	52.9%	3–3	4–5	5–3
2020–21	11–6	64.7%	4–2	6–2	5–4
2019–20	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2018–19	11–7	61.1%	5–2	6–2	5–5
2017–18	4–12	25.0%	2–4	3–5	1–7
2016–17	8–8	50.0%	3–3	4–4	4–3
2015–16	8–8	50.0%	4–2	4–4	4–4
2014–15	13–6	68.4%	6–0	7–2	6–4
2013–14	12–6	66.7%	6–0	7–2	5–4
2012–13	11–6	64.7%	4–2	7–1	4–5
2011–12	2–14	12.5%	2–4	2–6	0–8
2010–11	10–7	58.8%	4–2	6–3	4–4
2009–10	16–3	84.2%	6–0	9–1	7–1
2008–09	12–5	70.6%	4–2	6–2	6–3
2007–08	13–4	76.5%	5–1	6–3	7–1
2006–07	16–4	80.0%	3–3	10–0	5–4

Jacksonville Jaguars

Liam Coen's first season as a head coach at any level couldn't have gone much better. The 40-year-old former offensive coordinator for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Los Angeles Rams led the Jaguars to a 13-4 finish, flipping the script on a 4-13 season under Doug Pederson in 2024. The 13 wins were the most for a Jacksonville team since the 1999 squad finished 14-2. There were other encouraging signs of progress, too. Playing for his third full-time head coach in five seasons, quarterback Trevor Lawrence enjoyed his best season as a pro, emerging as a legitimate NFL MVP candidate as one of the five finalists for the award that eventually went to fellow quarterback Matthew Stafford of the Rams.

The defense, meanwhile, was the league's top-ranked unit against the run, propelling the Jaguars to a No. 11 finish in total defense. Last season's turnaround feels like a foundation to build upon rather than a one-year aberration as some of the Jaguars' previous playoff appearances turned out to be. The bigger question then might be whether the team's leadership did enough in the offseason to help this team get over the playoff hump in a crowded AFC where a loaded field of potential Super Bowl favorites awaits.

RUNNING GAME

Coen wasn't the only coach on the Jaguars' staff making his debut in a new role. While many young head coaches might be tempted to bring in experienced coordinators, Coen instead went with 29-year-old Grant Udinski in his first offensive coordinator job. Udinski wasn't even a full-time position coach until 2023, but things went so well last year that he even briefly flirted with the Buffalo Bills and Cleveland Browns for their open head coach positions before withdrawing from consideration.

Instead, he's back to lead an offense that was among the league's most productive units a year ago, ranked No. 11 overall in total offense and sixth in scoring

Trevor Lawrence

Brian Thomas Jr.

by Kendall Webb

offense (27.9 ppg). The Jaguars' ground game was only ranked 20th, but that had as much to do with their success through the airways (12th) with Lawrence finally taking a seat at the table with the league's top-tier passers. It will be a new-look backfield as Travis Etienne left via free agency to sign with the New Orleans Saints. Lawrence will likely feel the loss of Etienne more than anybody else as the two had been teammates for the past eight seasons, dating back to their three-year run together at Clemson. They even won a national title together for the Tigers for the 2018 season.

The question of who carries the rock moving forward might be an answer for the running back committee already on hand. That includes second-year players Bhayshul Tuten (83-307, 5 TDs) and LeQuint Allen Jr. (23-94, 0 TDs) along with offseason addition Chris Rodriguez Jr., who rushed for 500 yards and six touchdowns on 112 carries with the Washington Commanders last season. And while the goal is to limit big hits on Lawrence, he is an effective scrambler for a quarterback his size (6-foot-6, 220 pounds) with 1,442 career rushing yards, including career highs on the ground last year in both yards (359) and touchdowns (9).

The offensive line wasn't great, ranking just 24th in yards before first contact a year ago with Jaguars running backs averaging just 1.09 yards before getting hit. They are mostly stable, however, and maybe a year of working together will pay dividends with primary starters back at each position, including center Robert Hainsey, left tackle Walker Little, left guard Ezra Cleveland, right guard Patrick Mekari and right tackle Anton Harrison. Cole Van Lanen could also be in the mix after starting games at every position except center, and likely will compete with Walker for a starting spot.

PASSING GAME

The offensive line will also have to be better at pass protection as well, where they were generally ranked in the bottom quarter of the league's pass-blocking units. It didn't stop Lawrence from joining the NFL's list of top-tier quarterbacks, but it could hinder his progress toward truly elite status if he continues to be under duress to the extent he was in 2025. Lawrence was sacked a career-high 41 times—the sixth-most in the league. But Lawrence also threw a career high 29 touchdowns—four more than he had ever thrown in a season—while topping the 4,000-yard mark (4,007) for the third time in his career. If you're nitpicking MVP candidates then, ideally, Lawrence could throw fewer interceptions this fall after a season in which his 12 errant throws were tied for fifth-highest. And getting his completion percentage (60.9 percent) back up to the mid-60s would extend a few more drives, too.

The Jaguars have one of the more interesting receiver rooms in the NFL due, in part, to the presence of former Colorado Buffalo and 2024 Heisman Trophy winner Travis Hunter. A two-way player at both wide receiver and cornerback, the Jaguars paid dearly to acquire him in the 2025 NFL Draft trading their first and second-round picks last year and their 2026 first-rounder to move up three spots to assure they could get him. He ended up only playing

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Denver Broncos	4:05 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Cincinnati Bengals	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	vs. Philadelphia Eagles (in London)	9:30 a.m.
6	Oct. 18	vs. Houston Texans (in London)	9:30 a.m.
7		BYE WEEK	
8	Nov. 1	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 5	at Baltimore Ravens	8:15 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at New York Giants	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	TENNESSEE TITANS	4:05 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Chicago Bears	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 14	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	8:15 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Houston Texans	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	at Dallas Cowboys	8:20 p.m.
17	TBD	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	TBD
18	TBD	at Indianapolis Colts	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Trevor Lawrence	Nick Mullens
RB	Bhayshul Tuten	Chris Rodriguez Jr.
WR	Brian Thomas Jr.	Travis Hunter
WR	Jakobi Meyers	Tim Jones
WR	Parker Washington	Josh Cameron
TE	Brenton Strange	Nate Boerkircher
LT	Cole Van Lanen	Walker Little
LG	Ezra Cleveland	Emmanuel Pregnon
C	Robert Hainsey	Jonah Monheim
RG	Patrick Mekari	Wyatt Milum
RT	Anton Harrison	Chuma Edoga

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Travon Walker	Dennis Gardeck
LDT	Arik Armstead	Ruke Orhorhoro
RDT	DaVon Hamilton	Albert Regis
RDE	Josh Hines-Allen	Wesley Williams
WLB	Foyesade Oluokun	Branson Combs
MLB	Ventrell Miller	Parker Hughes
SLB	Jack Kiser	Yasir Abdullah
LCB	Travis Hunter	-
SS	Eric Murray	Rayuan Lane III
FS	Antonio Johnson	Jalen Huskey
RCB	Montaric Brown	Keith Taylor

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Cam Little	Logan Cooke

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	56	TE	Nate Boerkircher
3	81	DT	Albert Regis
3	88	G	Emmanuel Pregnon
3	100	S	Jalen Huskey
4	119	DE	Wesley Williams

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	2	CB/WR	Travis Hunter
3	88	CB	Caleb Ransaw
3	89	OG	Wyatt Milum
4	104	RB	Bhayshul Tuten
4	107	LB	Jack Kiser

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	23	WR	Brian Thomas
2	48	DT	Maason Smith
3	96	CB	Jarrian Jones
4	114	T	Javon Foster
4	116	DT	Jordan Jefferson

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	27	OT	Anton Harrison
2	61	TE	Brenton Strange
3	88	RB	Tank Bigsby
4	121	LB	Ventrell Miller
4	130	EDGE	Tyler Lacy

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	1	DE	Travon Walker
1	27	LB	Devin Lloyd
3	65	C	Luke Fortner
3	70	LB	Chad Muma
5	154	RB	Snoop Conner

Travis Hunter

seven games before suffering a non-contact LCL injury in practice that knocked him out for the rest of the season. And, now, offseason reports indicate that the Jags are leaning toward only using him sparingly as a receiver while he takes on a full-time role at cornerback. With a reduced role, the Jaguars are banking on a bounceback season from Brian Thomas Jr. who averaged 25 fewer receiving yards per game in 2025 after a breakout rookie season. Beyond Thomas, they will lean on Parker Washington (58-847) and Jakobi Meyers (42-483) in addition to tight end Brenton Strange (46-540).

RUN DEFENSE

Coen also went with a first-time coordinator on defense in Anthony Campanile, and the former longtime linebackers coach proved to be worth the gamble, too. He promptly assembled a unit that ranked 11th in total defense and eighth in scoring defense, and nobody was better at limiting the run than the Jaguars who yielded just 85.6 yards per game on the ground. The loss of All-Pro linebacker Devin Lloyd is the biggest story of the offseason on the defensive side. Lloyd signed with the Carolina Panthers, a move that was at least partially a result of Jacksonville declining its fifth-year option on their young star in the spring of 2025. The Jaguars reportedly offered him an extension after his breakout fourth season, but it was too little too late.

Pro Football Focus graded Lloyd above the 90th percentile in run defense, pass rushing and coverage, and it will likely take a combination of players to hit that mark in all those areas. The positive is that starters Foyesade Oluokun (143 tackles, 5 TFLs) and Dennis Gardeck (48 tackles, 6 TFLs) return. The line was more than capable in run support with Arik Armstead (28 tackles, 7 TFLs) and DaVon Hamilton (38 tackles, 3 TFLs) manning the interior while ends Josh Hines-Allen (12 TFLs) and Travon Walker (8 TFLs) wreaked havoc behind the line. Third-round pick Albert Regis will also help add depth.

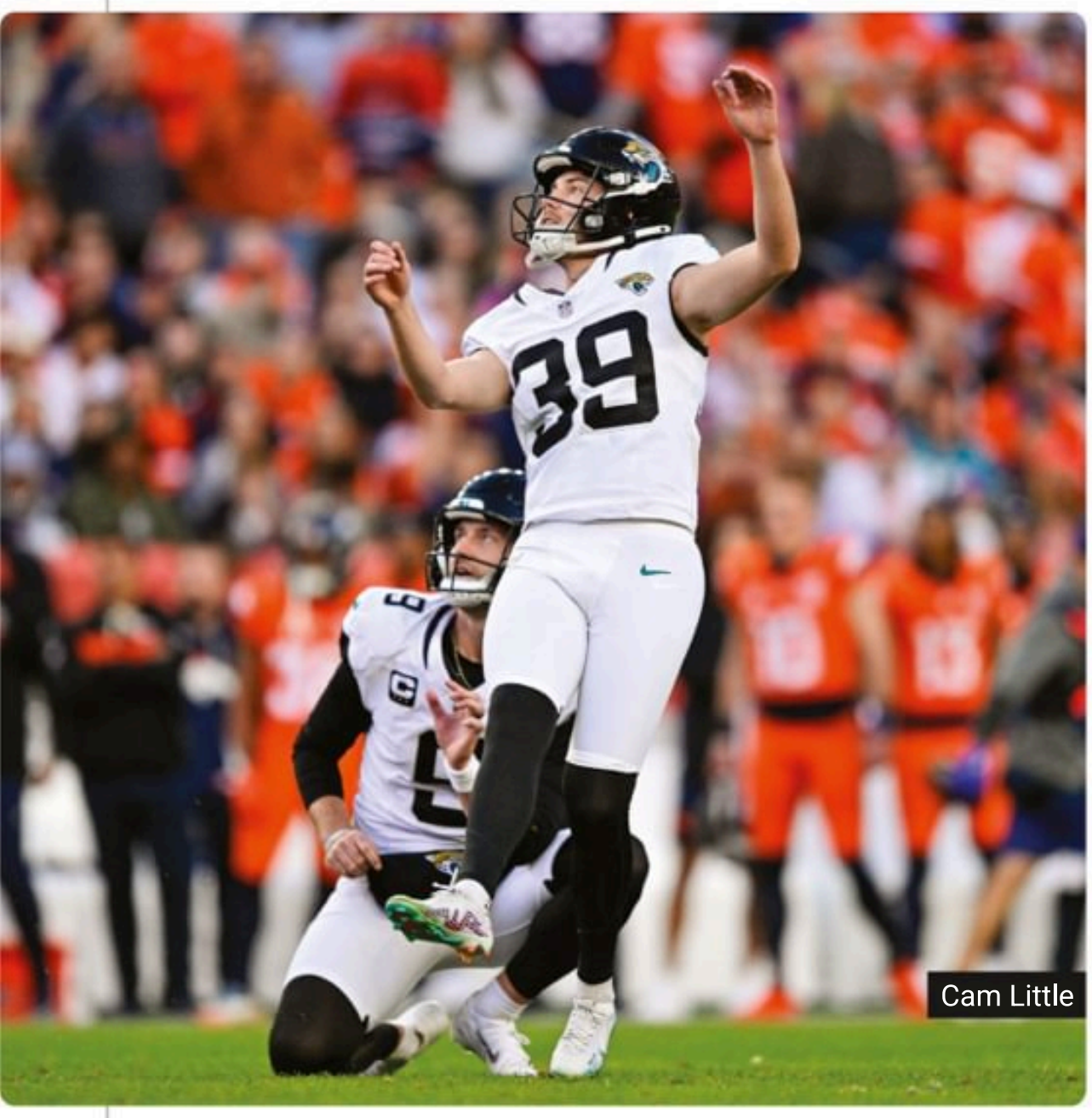
PASS DEFENSE

Jacksonville only ranked 21st against the pass, but that number is somewhat misleading. The Jaguars were often in the lead, forcing teams to the airways, and that resulted in them defending a league-high 635 attempts (while conversely helping their run-defense numbers). Other metrics reveal a pass defense that was successful in some of the areas that count the most. For example, the Jaguars recorded the seventh-lowest completion percentage (62.4 percent), and they were tied for the third-lowest average yards per pass attempt (6.2). They were also second in interceptions with 22.

Where they could be better is in generating more of a pass rush. They only got to opposing quarterbacks 32 times which ranked 27th, but when factored in with those 635 attempts, their actual sack percentage was just 4.69 percent—the third-lowest in the league. Those numbers are reflected in the individual sack totals with Hines-Allen leading the team with just eight, while Walker managed just 3.5 from the other side. Armstead was effective up the middle with 5.5 sacks from the interior, but generating more negative plays in the passing game is a priority.

Hunter's return, meanwhile, along with his increased focus on the defensive side, should bolster a secondary that was already strong a year ago. His counterpart at the opposite corner is Montaric Brown, and his 12 passes defended led the team. Safety Andrew Wingard signed with the Arizona Cardinals in March after finishing second on the team with 84 tackles, but it was a deep room with Eric Murray (54 tackles, 6 PDs) and Antonio Johnson (5 INTs) still around after playing

leading roles. It's worth noting, too, that Lloyd's loss will also be felt here, where he tied Johnson for the team lead in interceptions with five. Oluokun was also effective in pass defense from his linebacking position, finishing second on the team with 11 passes defended.


Cam Little

SPECIAL TEAMS

The kickoff returns were handled by running backs Allen (24-617, 25.7 avg.) and Tuten (19-539, 28.4 avg.), and the addition of Rodriguez to replace Etienne leaves open the possibility that the tandem can continue in those side gigs. Washington was one of the league's top punt returners with 25 opportunities for 341 yards (13.6 avg.) and two touchdowns.

Kicker Cam Little is back after finishing with the fourth-highest field goal percentage among kickers with at least 30 attempts. He connected on 30-of-34 kicks, and he was 50-of-51 on extra point tries. And he also set the record for the longest field goal, a 68-yarder against the Raiders, meaning the Jaguars are within scoring range at midfield. Logan Cooke was the league's ninth-best punter with a 48.0-yard average on 60 boots.

BOTTOM LINE

Jacksonville fielded its first team in 1995, and the Jaguars proceeded to make the playoffs in their next four seasons from 1996 to 1999. They've made the playoffs just five times in the 26 seasons since then, including last year's 27-24 loss to Buffalo in a Wild Card playoff at home in Jacksonville.

The Jaguars failed to even qualify for the playoffs in the season following their four most recent playoff appearances. That includes the 2023 season when they finished 9-8, missing out on the playoffs one year after posting an identical record and advancing to the Divisional Playoffs. The next challenge for Coen then is finding a way to expand upon last year's foundation, and even with the losses of Lloyd and Etienne, it feels like he has most of the pieces still in place. If the Jaguars can address the few gaps that exist, they just might be able to find that sustained success that has eluded the franchise for nearly three decades.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Liam Coen
First season with Jaguars: 2025
Regular-season record with Jaguars: 13–4 (75.5%)
Offensive coordinator: Grant Udinski
Defensive coordinator: Anthony Campanile
Special teams coordinator: Heath Farwell

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Pass game coordinator: Shane Waldron
Run game coordinator: Brian Picucci
Quarterbacks: Spencer Whipple
Running backs: Chad Morton
Wide receivers: Edgar Bennett
Assistant wide receivers: Tyler Tettleton
Tight ends: Richard Angulo
Offensive line: Shaun Sarrett
Pass game specialist: John Van Dam

DEFENSE

Defensive pass game coordinator: Mathieu Araujo
Defensive line: Matt Edwards
Assistant defensive line: Derrick LeBlanc
Linebackers: Tem Lukabu
Assistant linebackers: Kevin Wilkins
Defensive backs: Anthony Perkins
Assistant defensive backs: Drew Lascari

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	13–5	72.2%	5–1	7–2	6–2
2024–25	4–13	23.5%	3–3	2–5	1–7
2023–24	9–8	52.9%	4–2	3–5	4–3
2022–23	10–9	52.6%	4–2	6–2	4–6
2021–22	3–14	17.7%	1–5	2–6	0–8
2020–21	1–15	6.3%	1–5	1–7	0–8
2019–20	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–4	3–5
2018–19	5–11	31.3%	1–5	3–4	2–6
2017–18	12–7	63.2%	4–2	6–2	5–5
2016–17	3–13	18.8%	2–4	1–6	1–7
2015–16	5–11	31.3%	2–4	3–4	1–7
2014–15	3–13	18.8%	1–5	3–4	0–8
2013–14	4–12	25.0%	3–3	1–6	3–5
2012–13	2–14	12.5%	2–4	1–7	1–7
2011–12	5–11	31.3%	3–3	4–4	1–7
2010–11	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–5
2009–10	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2008–09	5–11	31.3%	2–4	2–6	3–5
2007–08	12–6	66.7%	2–4	6–2	6–4
2006–07	8–8	50.0%	2–4	6–2	2–6

Tony Pollard

Tennessee Titans

The Titans overhauled their coaching staff, hoping to find stability after a rocky past few seasons. They terminated Mike Vrabel following the 2023 season, even though he led Tennessee to division titles in 2020 and 2021. His replacement, Brian Callahan, lasted just 23 games, posting a 3-14 record in 2024 before he was fired last year after a 1-5 start. The Titans then limped to a 2-9 finish under interim coach Mike McCoy on their way to another 3-14 result.

Meanwhile, Vrabel was leading the New England Patriots back to the Super Bowl in his return to the sidelines after one season as a consultant with the Cleveland Browns. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but the Titans have now turned to former New York Jets boss Robert Saleh. He went 20-36 in just over three seasons with the Gang Green from 2021-2024, but that's not unforgivable considering how many coaches have found it difficult to win the Jets.

Like Vrabel, Saleh's known as a defensive-minded players' coach with an enthusiastic sideline demeanor that permeates throughout the team. He'll inherit a squad that feels more talented than its 2025 record would suggest, including a skilled young quarterback (Cam Ward) on offense, two fundamental building blocks on defense (Jeffery Simmons and Cedric Gray), and an elite performer on special teams (Chimere Dike).

RUNNING GAME

Saleh brought in former Giants head coach Brian Daboll as his new offensive coordinator, and his first order of business might be figuring out where former Cowboys Pro Bowl running back Tony Pollard fits into the Titans' future. Pollard came to Tennessee on a three-year deal as a free agent in 2024, and on the surface, his numbers have been decent. His first two seasons in Nashville have produced almost identical results with 1,079 yards and five touchdowns in 2024 and 1,082 yards with another five scores last season.

But Pollard's individual stats don't tell the whole story of Tennessee's rushing offense as a team that ranked 30th in the league with just 93.5 yards on the ground per game. The Titans also tied for the second-fewest rushing touchdowns with just nine trips to paydirt. And Pollard has another number causing concern—his four lost fumbles in 33 games as a Titan after losing only two in 79 games with Dallas. While Pollard is one of only two RBs with 1,000 rushing yards each of the last four seasons, the ball security concerns open the door for others. Fourth-year man Tyjae Spears ranked 10th among NFL running backs last season in total receptions, while rookie Nicholas Singleton could get a look.

The offensive line, meanwhile, will have a new look as center Lloyd Cushenberry was released in February with a failed physical designation. Second-year lineman Jackson Slater, who has only played guard so far, appears to be an option along with veteran back-up Austin Schlottmann. Left guard Peter Skoronski was the Titans' top lineman a year ago, but the right guard remains a question mark. Left tackle Dan Moore Jr. and right tackle JC Latham return to round out the unit.

PASSING GAME

The offensive line also needs to be better in pass protection where the Titans allowed the sixth-most sacks (56). Moore, for example, was ranked just 64th in pass blocking out of 89 qualifiers. He's got to be better at the key left tackle position after allowing 48 pressures with

eight sacks and seven quarterback hits. Of course, better pocket management by second-year quarterback Cam Ward will help, too, as he often held the ball too long, hunting for big plays rather than settling for smaller gains underneath. He tied Geno Smith of Las Vegas for the league lead in most sacks taken, as the unfortunate victim of 55 of those 56 sacks allowed by the Titans, and his 410 yards lost led the league.

Ward passed for 3,169 yards with 15 touchdowns and seven interceptions in his debut, but the Titans' offense ranked a paltry 30th in the league in passing yards (166.1 ypg). The team hopes first-round pick Carnell Tate immediately injects life into the passing attack, as he showed plenty of big-play ability at Ohio State. He's expected to start along with Calvin Ridley, who played in only seven games last season due to injuries. The top two wideouts from last season are back in Elic Ayomanor (41-515, 4 TDs) and Chimere Dike (48-423, 4 TDs). Tight end Gunnar Helm (44-357, 2 TDs) also returns.

The Titans were keen to use their running backs as receivers with Pollard and Spears combining for 78 catches for 470 yards. They were lacking a truly elite talent at receiver, however. In addition to drafting Tate, they also brought in former New York Giant Wan'Dale Robinson, who followed up a 93-catch season in 2024 with 92 receptions for 1,014 yards and four touchdowns.

RUN DEFENSE

Saleh's teams are known for playing great defense, and his new defensive coordinator Gus Bradley also brings a combined 17 years of coordinator and head coaching experience to his position. They've got the best player on the entire team to build around in All-Pro defensive tackle Jeffery Simmons. Tennessee will feature a four-man front as its base unit, switching over from the 3-4 employed by the previous regime that produced the league's No. 21 ranked unit in total defense and 28th in scoring defense. The Titans were middle of the pack against the run in the

Cam Ward

by Kendall Webb

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	NEW YORK JETS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	PHILADELPHIA EAGLES	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at New York Giants	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Baltimore Ravens	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	HOUSTON TEXANS	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Indianapolis Colts	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Cincinnati Bengals	1:00 p.m.
9		BYE WEEK	
10	Nov. 15	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Dallas Cowboys	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	at Jacksonville Jaguars	4:05 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Detroit Lions	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:05 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at Houston Texans	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Cam Ward	Mitchell Trubisky
RB	Tony Pollard	Tyjae Spears
WR	Carnell Tate	Elic Ayomanor
WR	Wan'Dale Robinson	Chimere Dike
WR	Calvin Ridley	Mason Kinsey
TE	Gunnar Helm	Daniel Bellinger
LT	Dan Moore Jr.	Austin Deculus
LG	Peter Skoronski	Fernando Carmona
C	Austin Schlottmann	Trey Hill
RG	Cordell Volson	Jackson Slater
RT	JC Latham	Ryan Hayes

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	John Franklin-Myers	Keldric Faulk
LDT	Jeffery Simmons	C.J. Ravenell
RDT	Jordan Elliott	Solomon Thomas
RDE	Jermaine Johnson II	Jacob Martin
WLB	Cedric Gray	Mohamoud Diabate
MLB	Cody Barton	Anthony Hill Jr.
SLB	James Williams Sr.	Cam Riley
LCB	Cor'Dale Flott	Keydrain Calligan
SS	Amani Hooker	Kendell Brooks
FS	Tony Adams	Kevin Winston Jr.
RCB	Joshua Williams	Micah Robinson

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Joey Slye	Tommy Townsend

Jeffery Simmons

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	4	WR	Carnell Tate
1	31	DE	Keldric Faulk
2	60	LB	Anthony Hill Jr.
5	142	G	Fernando Carmona
5	165	RB	Nicholas Singleton

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	1	QB	Cam Ward
2	52	DE	Oluwafemi Oladejo
3	82	S	Kevin Winston Jr.
4	103	WR	Chimere Dike
4	120	TE	Gunnar Helm

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	7	T	JC Latham
2	38	DT	T'Vondre Sweat
4	106	LB	Cedric Gray
5	146	CB	Jarvis Brownlee
6	182	WR	Jha'Quan Jackson

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	11	OL	Peter Skoronski
2	33	QB	Will Levis
3	81	RB	Tyjae Spears
5	147	TE	Josh Whyle
6	186	OT	Jaelyn Duncan

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	18	WR	Treylon Burks
2	35	CB	Roger McCreary
3	69	OT	Nicholas Petit-Frere
3	86	QB	Malik Willis
4	131	RB	Hassan Haskins

previous scheme, ranking 15th while yielding 114.6 yards per game. That number would have been marginally better if they weren't trailing late in so many games with opposing offenses running the ball to drain the clock.

Simmons is one of the league's best at his position, and he logged 67 tackles with 17 behind the line. But switching to the 4-3 means he will need a partner on the interior, and ideally, that will be a run-stuffer on early downs. Big T'Vondre Sweat (6-foot-4, 366 pounds) was one option before he was traded in March for edge rusher Jermaine Johnson, who previously played for Saleh with the Jets. In Sweat's place, the Titans brought in two interior linemen, including Jordan Elliott, who also played for Saleh in San Francisco last year. Solomon Thomas was then acquired via trade from Dallas.

Cedric Gray is one of the NFL's best young linebackers after finishing fourth in the league in tackles with 164 stops a year ago. Ninety-seven of those were of the solo variety, and seven of them came behind the line as Pro Football Focus rated him the No. 2 linebacker against the run in 2025. Cody Barton was a reliable contributor (81 tackles, 4 TFLs), but linebacker is another position where the Titans may have to rely on young talent, including second-round pick Anthony Hill Jr.

PASS DEFENSE

While the Titans' run defense could evolve into one of the league's elite units in short order, the pass defense is a little bit more of a work in progress. The Titans ranked 23rd against the pass a year ago, yielding 230.5 yards per game through the airways. Saleh's 4-3 scheme depends on the front four being able to generate pressure on their own without a lot of designed blitzing, and it's here where Simmons' true value as one of the league's best interior defenders is really highlighted. His 11 sacks were the highest total for an interior defensive lineman, and the Titans were desperate to add more help on the edge.

They brought in John Franklin-Myers from Denver, a durable and dependable sack artist, who's bagged 14.5 quarter-back takedowns the past two seasons. Bradley spoke in the spring of wanting to have one true edge player and another who can shift inside on third downs, and Franklin-Myers might be that guy. The addition of Johnson (43 tackles, 5 TFLs, 3 sacks) from the Jets gives them another valuable edge option to pair with Simmons on third downs. Jacob Martin (39 tackles, 3 TFLs, 5.5 sacks) is also around after spending last season in Washington, and the team added depth with Keldric Faulk, the 31st overall pick.

Linebacker Jaylen Harrell, came on late in the season with 4.5 sacks of his own, but the linebacking group as a whole needs to prove it can consistently offer support in pass coverage in the same manner as Barton, who led the team in interceptions (3) and passes defended (11). Barton's interception total, in fact, amounted to half of Tennessee's six interceptions as a team which was tied with the Dallas Cowboys and the San Francisco 49ers for the second-fewest in the league.

That's where the secondary can really make a difference by generating more takeaways and fewer big plays. At least one new face will be in the mix after cornerback L'Jarius Sneed was dropped after two injury-plagued seasons in Nashville. The Titans added two corners in Cor'Dale Flott (1 INTs, 11 PDs

with the Giants) and Alontae Taylor (2 INTs, 11 PDs with the Saints) who could be starters. Amani Hooker is a mainstay at safety, and Saleh has indicated he'd like to see second-year player Kevin Winston Jr. nail down the other spot. That leaves just the expanded nickel position that Saleh likes to employ where he's likely to be looking for another newcomer with size to emerge and play a position that overlaps between safety and linebacker.

SPECIAL TEAMS

One of Tennessee's two All-Pros a year ago was Dike, who finished third on the team in receptions, but worked overtime as the league's top punt returner, converting 23 opportunities into 398 yards (17.3 avg.) with two touchdowns. Technically, he pulled triple-duty as the team's primary kick returner with 62 for 1,588 yards. Kicker Joey Slye re-signed in March along with long snapper Morgan Cox. Tommy Townsend was signed to take over the punting chores from Johnny Hekker, and he'll likely be the team's holder, too.

BOTTOM LINE

A year of experience should serve Ward well, and if he gets better at picking his spots and taking what the defenses give him, then that will have a ripple effect down to the running game where the numbers should improve if the Titans are in fewer big holes this season. The Titans addressed the receiver room with the addition of Tate and Robinson, too. That, along with the return of Ridley, should have the passing attack on an upward trajectory.

The defense has a chance to evolve into a top run-stuffing unit, and the secondary feels improved with the moves the Titans made in the offseason. Expecting a miracle in Saleh's first season is far-fetched, but certainly Titans' fans have reasonable expectations for this team to exceed their consecutive 3-14 finishes while building toward a winner in the near future.

Chimere Dike

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Robert Saleh
Former 49ers defensive coordinator, 2017–20, 2025
Former Jets head coach, 2021–24
Offensive coordinator: Brian Daboll
Defensive coordinator: Gus Bradley
Special teams coordinator: John Fassel

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Shea Tierney
Running backs: Randy Jordan
Wide receivers: Greg Lewis
Tight ends: Luke Stocker
Offensive line: Carmen Bricillo
Assistant offensive line: Isaac Williams
Offensive assistant/game management: Cade Knox
Offensive assistant: Trevor Browder
Offensive assistant: John Rudnicki

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Aaron Whitecotton
Assistant defensive line: Tanzel Smart
Linebackers: Dave Borgonzi
Passing game coordinator/cornerbacks: Tony Oden
Defensive backs/safeties: Marquand Manuel
Defensive backs/nickels: Dalton Hilliard
Senior defensive assistant: Ben Bloom
Defensive assistant: Ahmed Saleh

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	3–14	17.7%	0–6	1–8	2–6
2024–25	3–14	17.7%	1–5	1–7	2–7
2023–24	6–11	35.3%	1–5	5–3	1–7
2022–23	7–10	41.2%	3–3	3–5	4–5
2021–22	12–6	66.7%	5–1	7–3	5–3
2020–21	11–6	64.7%	5–1	5–4	6–2
2019–20	11–8	57.9%	3–3	4–4	7–4
2018–19	9–7	56.3%	3–3	6–2	3–4
2017–18	10–8	55.6%	5–1	6–2	4–6
2016–17	9–7	56.3%	2–4	5–3	4–4
2015–16	3–13	18.8%	1–5	1–7	2–6
2014–15	2–14	12.5%	1–5	1–7	1–7
2013–14	7–9	43.8%	2–4	3–5	4–4
2012–13	6–10	37.5%	1–5	4–4	2–6
2011–12	9–7	56.3%	3–3	5–3	4–4
2010–11	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2009–10	8–8	50.0%	2–4	5–3	3–5
2008–09	13–4	76.5%	4–2	7–2	6–2
2007–08	10–7	58.8%	4–2	5–3	5–4
2006–07	8–8	50.0%	4–2	4–4	4–4

J.K. Dobbins

Denver Broncos

The Broncos were surprise AFC West champions at 14-3 last season. That will be difficult to match in one of the league's toughest and most competitive divisions. Sean Payton has turned Denver into a perennial playoff contender, armed with Bo Nix delivering two strong seasons as the starting quarterback. The offense does its part with Nix's clutch play leading the way, but the defense remains the foundation as it finished No. 3 in scoring and No. 2 total last season. Despite limited resources in free agency, the Broncos made one big splash to help Nix, acquiring former Dolphins wide receiver Jaylen Waddle. The team also retained running back J.K. Dobbins and maintained its strength on the offensive line. The defensive front seven didn't take any key hits with Nik Bonitto still leading the pass rush.

The Broncos caught a break in the AFC West in 2025 with the Chiefs suffering an atypical down season, the Raiders stalling in their major overhaul and the Chargers failing to emerge as a serious contender in Year 2 under Jim Harbaugh. They also must overcome the unlucky playoff ending, losing Nix to a broken fibula in the final seconds of their Divisional Playoffs win, which all but spelled doom entering the AFC championship game against the Patriots. The expectations remain mile high with Nix in the third season of his rookie contract. The Broncos are well-rounded enough entering 2026 to have another shot at winning a wide-open AFC, even if their role has evolved from surprising upstart to established young power.

RUNNING GAME

The Broncos' rushing attack was in the league's middle of the pack last season, finishing No. 16 in average yards per game (118.7) and tying for No. 13 in average yards per carry (4.4). Dobbins showed some of his early Ravens explosiveness when healthy for 10 games (5.0 yards per carry). Outside of some success in the red zone, however, rookie RJ Harvey was inefficient (3.7 yards per carry) when spelling Dobbins. The Broncos are sticking with that committee and hoping they will get more behind some often stout run blocking.

While Nix won't ever be confused for Ravens QB Lamar Jackson, his overall athleticism, decision-making on the run and scrambling ability allow him to supplement the backs well with his legs. The Broncos need more effectiveness and efficiency overall on the ground to help facilitate Nix with downfield passing concepts as he finished just 30th among qualified QBs last year in air yards per completion. Payton turned over playcalling duties to elevated quarterbacks coach Davis Webb in part to put Nix in a much better position to succeed passing downfield.

After passing on some potential big-name additions in free agency, the Broncos are hoping that Dobbins and Harvey improve

Bo Nix

how they complement each other with the right blend of power and big-play burst. Denver has no excuse not to be better given the support Dobbins and Harvey get up front. All five starters return for a Broncos O-line that allowed a league-low six sacks—seven fewer than any other team. First-Team All-Pro selections Garrett Bolles (LT) and Quinn Meinerz (RG) headline what should once again be one of the league's top units. Don't expect the Broncos to be a run-heavy or prolific force. In the end, Webb is a modern play-caller with the ultimate goal of opening up the passing game to stretch the field vertically and horizontally.

PASSING GAME

Payton and Webb know that Nix has yet to tap into his full potential. For such a winning QB, he was tied for only 26th in passer rating at 87.8 and 25th in completion percentage at 63.4. And despite leading the league in attempts, Nix's 6.4 yards per attempt ranked just 28th. Nix is one of the league's best-protected passers so there should be some more standout downfield passing results. Nix's calling card was his league-leading seven game-winning drives, routinely saving his best play for the fourth quarter and overtime. When looking at his numbers overall, however, he had a dropoff from his rookie season with a lot of rough play to show in his inconsistency.

Webb will work to correct that by getting Nix into a rhythm earlier with a quick, up-tempo passing game. Nix has the arm and accuracy to execute a diversified attack to progress from dinking and dunking to being more aggressive in taking shots. Waddle gives Nix a bona fide No. 2 who can be dangerous in a short area after the catch and also utilize his speed and quickness to open up the vertical attack. The former Dolphins frequent slot is a good complement to the big-bodied boundary play of Courtland Sutton.

Having Waddle's versatility to work inside and outside should also create better matchups for rising young No. 3 Troy Franklin. Franklin flashed some good chemistry with his former college QB Nix and now has less pressure with the experience of Waddle in the mix. Pat Bryant and Marvin Mims also won't be forced into bigger roles as they each still need more time to develop as playmakers. The Broncos are looking to get more out of tight end, a staple of Payton's Saints' offenses with Jimmy Graham. Evan Engram was a disappointment coming off some high-production seasons in Jacksonville, and he will turn 32 in September. The Broncos need some youth from the position to serve better as a different kind of weapon for Nix.

by Vinnie Iyer

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 14	at Kansas City Chiefs	8:15 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	4:05 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	LOS ANGELES RAMS	8:20 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at San Francisco 49ers	4:25 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Los Angeles Chargers	4:05 p.m.
6	Oct. 15	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	8:15 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Arizona Cardinals	4:05 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	4:25 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at Carolina Panthers	1:00 p.m.
10		BYE WEEK	
11	Nov. 22	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	4:25 p.m.
12	Nov. 27	at Pittsburgh Steelers	3:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	MIAMI DOLPHINS	4:05 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:25 p.m.
16	Dec. 25	BUFFALO BILLS	4:30 p.m.
17	TBD	at New England Patriots	TBD
18	TBD	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Bo Nix	Jarrett Stidham
RB	J.K. Dobbins	RJ Harvey
WR	Courtland Sutton	Pat Bryant
WR	Jaylen Waddle	Marvin Mims Jr.
WR	Troy Franklin	Lil'Jordan Humphrey
TE	Evan Engram	Adam Trautman
LT	Garett Bolles	Matt Peart
LG	Ben Powers	Alex Palczewski
C	Luke Wattenberg	Alex Forsyth
RG	Quinn Meinerz	Calvin Throckmorton
RT	Mike McGlinchey	Kage Casey

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Malcolm Roach	Tyler Onyedim
NT	D.J. Jones	Eyioma Uwazurike
RDE	Zach Allen	Sai'vion Jones
WLB	Jonathon Cooper	Jonah Elliss
LILB	Alex Singleton	Red Murdock
RILB	Justin Strnad	Drew Sanders
SLB	Nik Bonitto	Dondrea Tillman
LCB	Riley Moss	Reese Taylor
SS	Talanoa Hufanga	JL Skinner
FS	Brandon Jones	Devon Key
RCB	Pat Surtain II	Kris Abrams-Draine

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Wil Lutz	Jeremy Crawshaw

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
3	66	DT	Tyler Onyedim
4	108	RB	Jonah Coleman
4	111	T	Kage Casey
5	152	TE	Justin Joly
7	246	S	Miles Scott

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	20	CB	Jahdae Barron
2	60	RB	RJ Harvey
3	74	WR	Pat Bryant
3	101	DE	Sai'vion Jones
4	134	LB	Que Robinson

2024

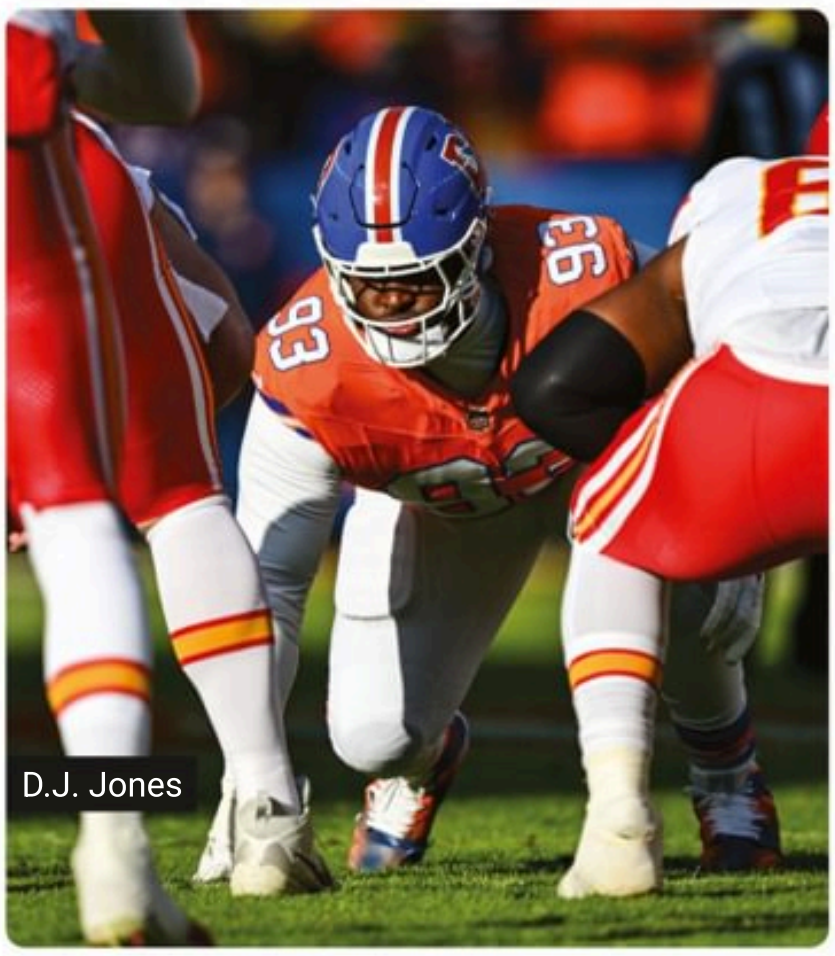
Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	12	QB	Bo Nix
3	76	EDGE	Jonah Elliss
4	102	WR	Troy Franklin
5	145	CB	Kris Abrams-Draine
5	147	RB	Audric Estime

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	63	WR	Marvin Mims
3	67	LB	Drew Sanders
3	83	CB	Riley Moss
6	183	S	JL Skinner
7	257	C	Alex Forsyth

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	64	LB	Nik Bonitto
3	80	TE	Greg Dulcich
4	115	CB	Damarri Mathis
4	116	DT	Eyioma Uwazurike
5	152	S	Delarrin Turner-Yell



D.J. Jones

Another part of the passing game going back to Payton in New Orleans is effective use of a receiving back. That might end up being the busier role overall for Harvey, who offers more dynamic playmaking potential as a pass catcher than Dobbins. Webb's challenge will be having Nix raise his efficiency while also empowering him to let the ball loose more in taking shots. Nix is smart and experienced enough to gather the new concepts and blend them with Payton's approach the past two seasons. When factoring in the changes with Webb and Waddle and returning depth and protection, the Broncos should demand a lot more of their passing game. Nix has proved he will stick around as the franchise QB, but his third season posits a bit of a make-or-break in terms of whether he can graduate from game manager to the league's upper echelon of passers.

RUN DEFENSE

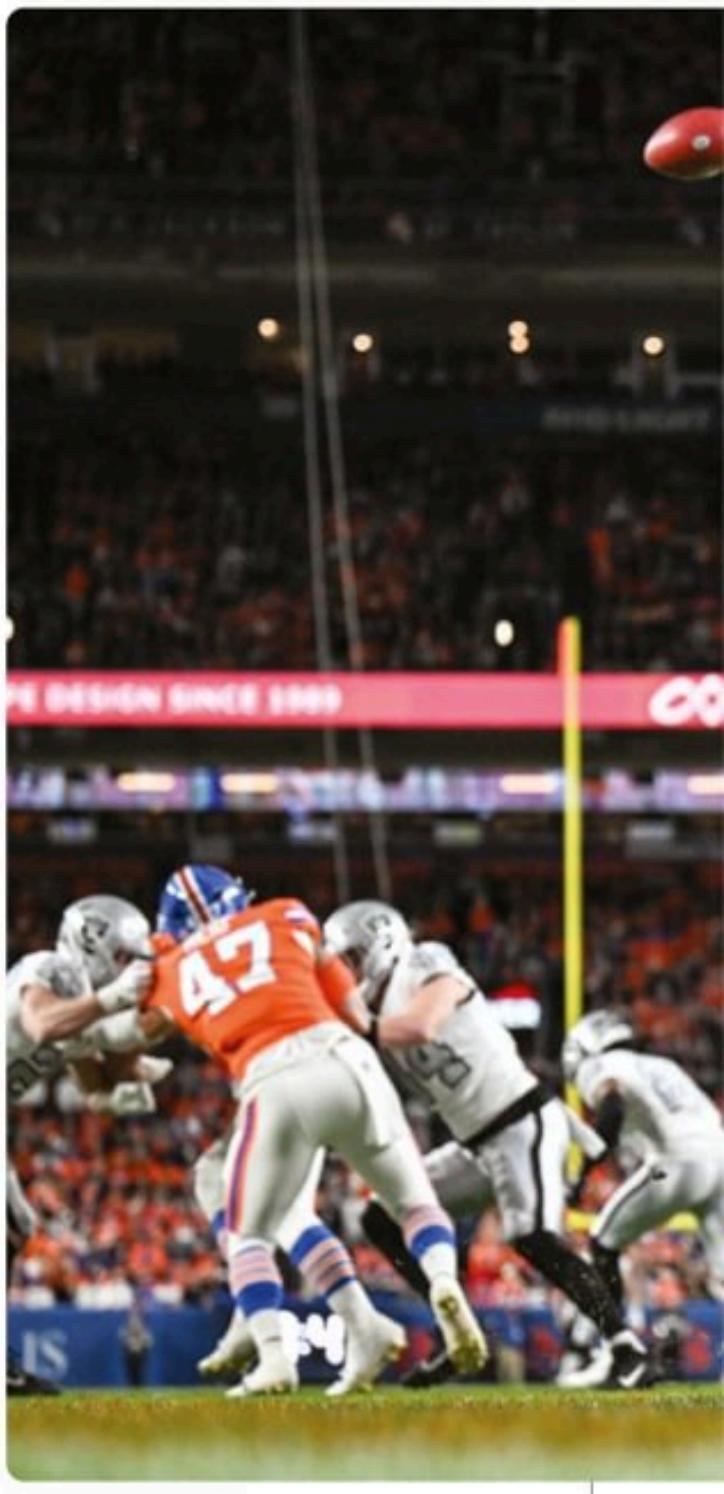
The Broncos fielded the league's No. 2 run defense last season, giving up on average only 91.1 rushing yards per game. They also tied for second in giving up 3.9 yards per carry. Although there were some struggles during the playoffs, the front remains stout. Denver's dominance starts with nose tackle D.J. Jones, the tone-setter in Vance Joseph's defense. The team also kept its best run-stopping linebacker, the tenacious Alex Singleton. Those are the linchpins but the Broncos overall are assignment sound and are coached to diagnose and tackle well.

Their stingy nature on early downs is critical to the Broncos being such a complete defense. With the personnel intact, there's every reason to believe that the Broncos will build on their success from 2025. The Broncos not only control the action in the middle of the front seven, but they also have sound run defense contributions from their secondary. That is good news for them sustaining a prolific pass rush.

PASS DEFENSE

The Broncos boasted by far the best pass rush in the NFL in 2025, sacking opposing QBs on 10 percent of dropbacks and leading the league with 68 sacks, 11 more than any other team. In terms of total QB hits, the gap from Denver to the second-best team was larger than the gap from the second-best to the 26th-best—that's dominant. The leader is elite edge rusher Nik Bonitto, who was responsible for 14 of those 68 sacks. Bonitto is right up there as one of the league's best overall defensive players and a difficult matchup for any offensive tackle. That has allowed Jonathon Cooper to emerge as a solid complementary outside linebacker, coming off an eight-sack season.

Joseph has done well to bring a dangerous pass rush from all angles. Inside, the team lost John Franklin-Myers (7.5 sacks) to the Titans in free agency but still has the very active Zach Allen (7 sacks) in front of their 3-4. They are expecting end Malcolm Roach to build on his four sacks in a starting role this season. At linebacker, Singleton wasn't the only key player retained. Justin Strnad was re-signed as an adept blitzer and rangy cover man.



Bonitto is the headliner, but the Broncos get it done well by committee and respond when Joseph brings extra pressure.

The Broncos can afford to trust their outside cornerbacks well in single coverage. Pat Surtain II is only a season removed from winning AP Defensive Player of the Year honors and is a premier shutdown corner. With teams mostly avoiding Surtain, No. 2 Riley Moss responded by leading the league with 19 passes defended last season. The secret weapon is Ja'Quan McMillan, a big play waiting in the slot, whether it's jumping routes in coverage or supporting the pass rush. Safety Talanoa Hufanga rounds out a top NFL secondary with his well-rounded play.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Broncos have been happy with the work of former Saints kicker Wil Lutz, now working for Payton again to take advantage of the favorable home altitude on field goal attempts. Australian punter Jeremy Crawshaw has a big booming leg, leaving little concern. Mims is explosive returning punts and kickoffs and can be focused more on that vital transitional role with Waddle adding to the offense. Mitchell Fraboni gives them an experienced long snapper, too.

BOTTOM LINE

The Broncos are complete contenders who have a top defense fired up by the league's most productive pass rush. That gives them a high floor in the AFC playoff picture to at least return as a wild-card team. The law of averages says they won't be adept at winning as many close games with great late escapes, but they have the strength and balance to finish with double-digit victories for a third consecutive season under Payton. Whether they can go that extra game and get to the Super Bowl will depend on getting more out of the running game and Nix in Webb's offense.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Sean Payton
First season with Broncos: 2023
Regular-season record with Broncos: 32–19 (62.7%)
Offensive coordinator: Davis Webb
Defensive coordinator: Vance Joseph
Special teams coordinator: Darren Rizzi

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Offensive pass game coordinator: John Morton
Quarterbacks: Logan Kilgore
Assistant quarterbacks: Evan Rothstein
Running backs: Lou Ayeni
Wide receivers: Ronald Curry
Tight ends: Austin King
Offensive run game coordinator: Zach Strief
Offensive line: Chris Morgan
Quality control: JD Johnson / Kyle Kempt / Willie Snead IV

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Jamar Cain
Inside linebackers: Jeff Schmedding
Outside linebackers: Isaac Shewmaker
Defensive pass game coordinator: Robert Livingston
Defensive backs: Doug Belk
Senior defensive assistant: Joe Vitt
Defensive quality control: Todd Davis
Defensive quality control: Brian Niedermeyer

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	15–4	79.0%	5–1	9–2	5–2
2024–25	10–8	55.6%	3–3	6–2	4–6
2023–24	8–9	47.1%	3–3	5–4	3–5
2022–23	5–12	29.4%	1–5	4–4	0–8
2021–22	7–10	41.2%	1–5	4–5	3–5
2020–21	5–11	31.3%	1–5	2–6	3–5
2019–20	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2018–19	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2017–18	5–11	31.3%	2–4	4–4	1–7
2016–17	9–7	56.3%	2–4	5–3	4–4
2015–16	15–4	79.0%	4–2	8–2	6–2
2014–15	12–5	70.6%	6–0	8–1	4–4
2013–14	15–4	79.0%	6–1	9–1	6–2
2012–13	13–4	76.5%	6–0	7–2	6–2
2011–12	9–9	50.0%	3–3	4–5	5–4
2010–11	4–12	25.0%	1–5	3–5	1–6
2009–10	8–8	50.0%	3–3	4–4	4–4
2008–09	8–8	50.0%	3–3	4–4	4–4
2007–08	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2006–07	9–7	56.3%	3–3	4–4	5–3

Kansas City Chiefs

The 2026 Chiefs are in the rare position of trying to return to the playoffs after failing to qualify for the postseason under Andy Reid for the first time since 2014. Making matters worse was the fact franchise quarterback Patrick Mahomes suffered a torn ACL late in the season after playing 14 games. The cumulative effect was a 6-11 record, marking the first time Kansas City finished below .500 in Reid's tenure. That raised a lot of questions on whether the Chiefs' dynasty is finished or they have just hit the pause button after enduring through the most brutal Super Bowl hangover. There is hope Mahomes will recover from his knee injury in time to play most or all of the season. And after retirement speculation, future HOF tight end Travis Kelce opted to return for seemingly one last shot at a Super Bowl.

Mahomes (31 in September), Kelce (37 in October) and defensive tackle Chris Jones (32 in July) have been the core of the Chiefs' dominance, reaching five Super Bowls in six seasons from 2019-24. The biggest offseason addition is Seahawks Super Bowl MVP Kenneth Walker III, who should take pressure off Mahomes with some much needed pop out of the backfield. Defensively, Jones leads a familiar front seven but the team overhauled its secondary after trading star corner Trent McDuffie to the Rams and losing both Jaylen Watson and Joshua Williams in free agency. The big question: Is KC reloading or rebuilding?

Kingsley Suamataia

RUNNING GAME

After years of a stopgap running game by committee, the Chiefs invested in a true lead back in Walker and moved on from both Isiah Pacheco and Kareem Hunt. They had the No. 25 rushing offense, averaging 106.6 yards per game last season with a limited 4.2 yards per carry. The Chiefs were one of the least frequent running teams (40.5 percent) in 2025. The addition of Walker signals a willingness to run more.

The strength is between the tackles, where their two best offensive linemen, center Creed Humphrey and right guard Trey Smith, reside as athletic run blockers. The Chiefs also have high expectations for left guard Kingsley Suamataia being a bigger part of the successful equation.

The other reason to think the Chiefs are committed is the re-hiring of offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy. KC ranked inside the top eight in rush yards per attempt during Bienemy's last two years as Chiefs OC in 2021 and 2022. The Chiefs may need to go run-heavier to take pressure off a recovering Mahomes at least earlier in the season. While Kansas City will always be a pass-leaning attack with Mahomes, a revamped run game should keep defenses honest and help generate some big pass shots off play-action that have been limited in recent seasons. Should the Chiefs be willing to commit to the run, the results will show.

PASSING GAME

The Chiefs are optimistic Mahomes will be ready to play Week 1. If not, Reid would need to go with his new backup,

Rashee Rice

by Vinnie Iyer

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 14	DENVER BRONCOS	8:15 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	8:20 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Miami Dolphins	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:25 p.m.
5		BYE WEEK	
6	Oct. 18	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	4:25 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Seattle Seahawks	8:20 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Denver Broncos	4:25 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	NEW YORK JETS	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Atlanta Falcons	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	ARIZONA CARDINALS	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 26	at Buffalo Bills	8:20 p.m.
13	Dec. 3	at Los Angeles Rams	8:15 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Cincinnati Bengals	4:25 p.m.
15	Dec. 21	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	8:15 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	4:25 p.m.
17	TBD	at Los Angeles Chargers	TBD
18	TBD	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Patrick Mahomes	Justin Fields
RB	Kenneth Walker III	Emari Demercado
WR	Rashee Rice	Nikko Remigio
WR	Xavier Worthy	Jalen Royals
WR	Tyquan Thornton	Cyrus Allen
TE	Travis Kelce	Noah Gray
LT	Josh Simmons	Esa Pole
LG	Kingsley Suamataia	C.J. Hanson
C	Creed Humphrey	Hunter Nourzad
RG	Trey Smith	Mike Caliendo
RT	Jaylon Moore	Wanya Morris

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	George Karlaftis	Ashton Gillotte
LDT	Chris Jones	Peter Woods
RDT	Khyiris Tonga	Omarr Norman-Lott
RDE	Felix Anudike-Uzomah	R Mason Thomas
WLB	Drue Tranquill	Jeffrey Bassa
MLB	Nick Bolton	Jack Cochrane
SLB	Cole Christiansen	Jadon Canady
LCB	Nohl Williams	Melvin Smith Jr.
SS	Chamarri Conner	Jaden Hicks
FS	Alohi Gilman	Chris Roland-Wallace
RCB	Mansoor Delane	Kristian Fulton

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Harrison Butker	Matt Araiza

Justin Fields. Should Fields need to see meaningful action early, the Chiefs would need to wait before going full throttle with their downfield passing playbook. Even with Mahomes back, the dual-threat Fields offers a dynamic look that gives Reid more options for creative packages and gadgets. The receiving room remains a work in progress. Beyond Kelce and backup tight end Noah Gray, the Chiefs will once again rely on a receivers room that includes Rashee Rice, Xavier Worthy and Tyquan Thornton. The biggest key to unlocking more big plays is third-year speedster Worthy becoming more reliable as an overall outside factor. There is potential to channel some of the best MVP days of Mahomes with Kelce being flanked by Tyreek Hill, now that Bieniemy is back. But all three wideouts need to be healthy and reliable for that to happen. Despite draft speculation that KC would target a receiver early—potentially with a top-10 pick—it waited until the fifth round to grab Cyrus Allen out of Cincinnati, the 26th WR off the board.

Mahomes developed good chemistry with Thornton, allowing the team to move on from Hollywood Brown. For Rice, the only concern about his ability is availability. He's missed more than half of the past two seasons following his breakout rookie campaign. Because of injury and suspension, he's played in only 12 of the past 34 games. He is very efficient and consistent when on the field, ranking 13th in receiving yards per game over the last two seasons. Rice has avoided league discipline in 2026 and needs to take advantage of a full season to make the jump to top young receiver. Worthy also has had some injury issues but now playing off Rice and Thornton, it would be disappointing if he doesn't have a major spike in yards per reception and touchdowns.

What does Kelce have left as a playmaker? The explosion has gone down with the added wear at his age as his last 1,000-yard plus season was 2022. His catch rate remains in the 70s and he still knows how to get open and move the chains

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	6	CB	Mansoor Delane
1	29	DT	Peter Woods
2	40	DE	R Mason Thomas
4	109	CB	Jadon Canady
5	161	RB	Emmett Johnson

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	32	OT	Josh Simmons
2	63	DT	Omarr Norman-Lott
3	66	DE	Ashton Gillotte
3	85	CB	Nohl Williams
4	133	WR	Jalen Royals

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	28	WR	Xavier Worthy
2	63	T	Kingsley Suamataia
4	131	TE	Jared Wiley
4	133	S	Jaden Hicks
5	159	C	Hunter Nourzad

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	31	EDGE	Felix Anudike-Uzomah
2	55	WR	Rashee Rice
3	93	OT	Wanya Morris
4	119	CB	Chamarri Conner
5	166	DE	BJ Thompson

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	21	CB	Trent McDuffie
1	30	DE	George Karlaftis
2	54	WR	Skyy Moore
2	62	S	Bryan Cook
3	103	LB	Leo Chenal

George Karlaftis

with his fine route-running. The Chiefs should also try to go back to unlocking him more in the red zone. Another element is extracting better pass protection for Mahomes minus long-time liability Jawaan Taylor. The Chiefs are banking on more consistency out of promising 2025 first-round pick Josh Simmons. After one rough first season in Kansas City, the Chiefs also hope that former 49ers backup Jaylon Moore will be better suited to regular right-tackle duty replacing Taylor.

Kelce and Rice are critical to the intermediate passing game, but with Walker's limitations as a receiver, the Chiefs are hoping for either former Cardinal Emari Dermarcado or youngster Brashard Smith to give renewed short-area help from the backfield. Mahomes should feel good about what he has weapons-wise in his reunion with Bieniemy to help rejuvenate him after the first major injury of his career.

RUN DEFENSE

The Chiefs have fielded a top-10 defense each of the last three seasons under defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo and have improved against the run, finishing 6th in the NFL in yards per carry allowed last season. While Chris Jones and a new DT starter, former Patriot Khyiris Tonga, are known more for their pass rushing ability, George Karlaftis consistently ranks among the best D-linemen against the run.

In the second level, linebackers Drue Tranquill and Nick Bolton are excellent in reacting and cleaning up against the run. The Chiefs will need to compensate for losing linebacker Leo Chenal and Bryan Cook, two key supporting assets. Cook was replaced well with Alohi Gilman, but the Chiefs are bound to take a hit without Chenal's active upfield presence. Kansas City cannot be qualified quite as dominant in this area and might slip a notch or two in 2026. Tranquill and Bolton will ensure there's no major dropoff.

PASS DEFENSE

On paper, the Chiefs' pass rush and pass defense metrics didn't match the talent in 2025. While they allowed only 18 TD passes, tied for fourth-fewest, they also finished with just 35 sacks which ranked in the bottom third. And for how much talent they had in the secondary, there were only 10 interceptions to show for it.

While Spagnuolo is renowned for his extravagant, disguised and timely blitz packages, the results were a mixed bag in 2025. Jones and Karlaftis combined for only 13 sacks, with neither hitting double digits. The Chiefs need a sudden lift from disappointing first-rounder Felix Anudike-Uzomah opposite Karlaftis. In addition to the aforementioned Tonga, the Chiefs added DT Peter Woods with the No. 29 overall pick. Once considered a potential top-15 pick before an underwhelming 2025 season at Clemson, Woods is a classic high-upside, high-risk pick. They want to be less dependent on Spagnuolo's extravagant blitz packages and get back to getting pressure with only the front four.

Kansas City also overhauled the secondary with McDuffie, Watson, Williams and Cook all leaving. The Chiefs moved up from No. 9 to No. 6 overall to select LSU star CB Mansoor Delane, a physical press corner considered by most the top corner in the draft. Gilman will get help in inside coverage from former Dolphins slot cover man Kader Kohou. Nohl Williams has a chance to replace McDuffie or Watson in one of the jobs outside. The Chiefs have

been adept at drafting cornerbacks and hope they can strike gold again with Delane to give Spagnuolo the coverage fit well for his system. There was a lot of focus on the passing game losing Mahomes late last season and there's hope for a rebound in 2026. Getting the pass defense back on track is just as critical.

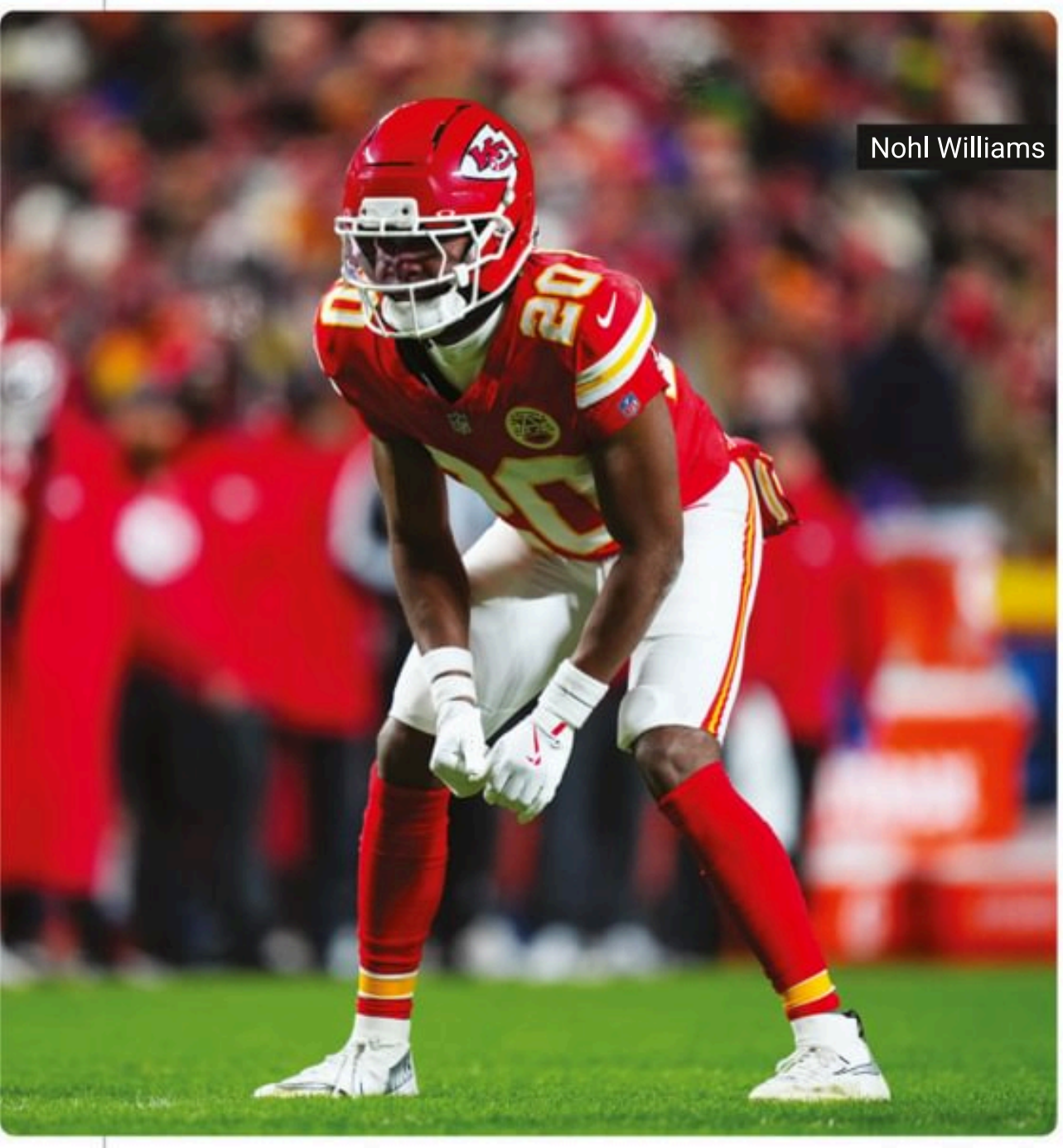
SPECIAL TEAMS

The historically reliable Harrison Butker is looking to bounce back after missing five field goals (33-for-38) and a career high four extra-points (31-for-35). Kansas City's punting situation is average with Matt Araiza, who rose to only that level into his second season. The Chiefs have a solid young return man in Nikko Remigio and a venerable long-snapper in James Winchester. With Dave Toub coaching their special teams since 2013, they continue to have solid kickoff and punt return coverage units.

BOTTOM LINE

The Chiefs are hoping they are just having a mid-career hiccup with Mahomes and much like the Patriots' AFC Super Bowl dynasty, are working toward rebooting another run of multiple shots at a ring. Kansas City doesn't believe it is done winning Super Bowls with Mahomes in this window, otherwise Kelce would not be running it back. Early, it was Mahomes' MVP QB play and a prolific offense leading the Chiefs to rings. Then they became more reliant on Spagnoulo's defense to be the top supporting foundation. Now the burden is tiling back toward Mahomes while he's also dealing with his toughest physical adversity.

Although the Chiefs in theory benefit from a third-place schedule in 2026, they actually have the league's fifth-hardest schedule based on last year's records. The Chiefs won't just accept another season of lumps before they can push back toward the top of the conference and league. Assuming Mahomes is healthy, expect the Chiefs to once again factor in the AFC playoff picture.


Nohl Williams

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Andy Reid
First season with Chiefs: 2013
Regular-season record with Chiefs: 149–64 (70.0%)
Offensive coordinator: Eric Bieniemy
Defensive coordinator: Steve Spagnuolo
Special teams coordinator: Dave Toub

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Pass game coordinator: Joe Bleymaier
Quarterbacks: David Girardi
Assistant quarterbacks: Dan Williams
Running backs: DeMarco Murray
Wide receivers: Chad O'Shea
Tight ends: Tom Melvin
Offensive line: Andy Heck
Assistant offensive line: Corey Matthaei
Offensive quality control: Nate Pagan

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Joe Cullen
Assistant defensive line: Terry Bradden Jr.
Linebackers: Brendan Daly
Outside linebackers: Matt House
Defensive backs: Dave Merritt
Safeties: Andre Curtis
Defensive quality control: Chris Orr
Defensive quality control: C.J. Cox

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	6–11	35.3%	1–5	5–4	1–6
2024–25	17–3	85.0%	5–1	10–0	7–2
2023–24	15–6	71.4%	4–2	5–4	8–2
2022–23	17–3	85.0%	6–0	9–1	7–2
2021–22	14–6	70.0%	5–1	9–3	5–3
2020–21	16–3	84.2%	4–2	8–2	8–1
2019–20	15–4	79.0%	6–0	7–3	6–1
2018–19	13–5	72.2%	5–1	8–2	5–3
2017–18	10–7	58.8%	5–1	6–3	4–4
2016–17	12–5	70.6%	6–0	6–3	6–2
2015–16	12–6	66.7%	5–1	5–2	6–4
2014–15	9–7	56.3%	3–3	6–2	3–5
2013–14	11–6	64.7%	2–4	5–3	6–3
2012–13	2–14	12.5%	0–6	1–7	1–7
2011–12	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4
2010–11	10–7	58.8%	2–4	7–2	3–5
2009–10	4–12	25.0%	2–4	1–7	3–5
2008–09	2–14	12.5%	2–4	1–7	1–7
2007–08	4–12	25.0%	2–4	2–6	2–6
2006–07	9–8	52.9%	4–2	6–2	3–6

Ashton Jeanty

Las Vegas Raiders

The Raiders have already spent six long seasons in Las Vegas. Since they snuck into the 2021 AFC playoffs as a 10-7 wild card, they have gone 21-47. They have gone through three more coaches in four seasons. Josh McDaniels, Antonio Pierce and even Pete Carroll all didn't work. But there's great promise for GM John Spytek and notable minority owner Tom Brady that Klint Kubiak, the latest coaching hire in 2026, will. The rookie coach has good genes as the son of Broncos Super Bowl–winning coach Gary Kubiak. But Klint, Sporting News' reigning coordinator of the year, is a big reason why the Seahawks fielded a Super Bowl–winning offense last season.

Now Kubiak is tasked with turning around a franchise that has been a revolving door of late, and helping rookie No. 1 overall pick Fernando Mendoza keep up his high level of winning execution that he showed at Indiana will be his biggest job. Mendoza is the latest QB to enter the league on the strength of a Heisman Trophy/national championship 1-2 punch. He has the drive, fight and talent to restore the Raiders with a long-term franchise passer. Mendoza marks the third consecutive offensive skill splash in the first round, following tight end Brock Bowers and running back Asthon Jeanty. That's not a bad start for Kubiak to get the best out of Mendoza as soon as possible, but the offensive line and wide receiver corps need to cooperate, too. Adding top center Tyler Linderbaum and former Vikings No. 3 target Jalen Nailor will help in that process.

Defensively, the drama with edge rusher Maxx Crosby going from long gone to staying with no trade was a twist. For the Raiders, that botched move may not be bad, given they added reinforcements in the front seven with end Kwity Paye and linebackers Nakobe Dean and Quay Walker. They also made a move to shore up nickel back with former Bill Taron Johnson. The Raiders organization has tried to create some buzz in Las Vegas through attaching itself to Brady and exorcising the lingering bad vibes of trying to make it work with Jon Gruden again. The combination of Kubiak and Mendoza signals a shift toward finding real substance with style made for The Strip.

RUNNING GAME

For taking Jeanty No. 6 overall in 2025 and then hiring Chip Kelly as the offensive coordinator, the Raiders' rushing attack was a monumental disappointment last season. They finished dead last in both average yards per game (77.5) and average yards per carry (3.6). The Raiders were supposed to be run-heavy, but they ran only 38.9 percent of the time, which also didn't help the production. Jeanty fell 25 yards short of 1,000 yards rushing, averaging 3.7 yards per attempt on his 266 carries. He had to rely more on his receiving production through the red zone to be effective. He also was thrown off by Kelly trying to alter the running style that made Jeanty an elite prospect at Boise State.

Kubiak's Seahawks had the No. 11 rushing offense at 123.3 yards per game. They were very balanced, running 50 percent of the time. That mentality shouldn't change now that he has a three-down potential workhorse back in Jeanty. Whether it's Mendoza at quarterback or Kirk Cousins serving as the veteran bridge, the Raiders will be run-first to better complement the passing game and also ease the pressure on a defense in a transition. Linderbaum, a healthy Kolton Miller at left tackle and Jackson Powers-Johnson at right guard give the Raiders a good run-blocking foundation to execute Kubiak's game plan and maximize Jeanty's skillset.

Jeanty will no doubt get increased volume that has him flirting with 300 carries. That translates to about two more attempts per game, but there is hope that he can average one more yard per game, which would transform the Raiders from the league's worst running the ball to one of the best. The personnel is there to get the job done. That would be great for Mendoza whenever he gets a chance to start during his rookie season.

PASSING GAME

The Raiders have declared that the best QB in the offseason will start, whether it's Cousins or Mendoza. Their dropback pocket passing style is similar with big, accurate downfield arms. Cousins can't be ruled out to start, despite Mendoza's No. 1 overall status. It would be atypical to sit Mendoza

based on recent history of other teams in the same situation. But the Raiders also might choose to be patient, given their personnel overhaul and rebuilding mode. The offense won't change for either quarterback. With Kubiak's emphasis on the running game, Mendoza and Cousins can expect play-action passing to a big part of taking deep shots. With Mendoza being much more athletic than Cousins, rolling the rookie out and using bootleg action would come a lot more into play.

Cousins has been in similar systems. Mendoza also will have a favorable pro transition in the QB-friendly scheme. The Raiders are set up well on short-to-intermediate routes, from checkdowns to Jeanty to Bowers getting down the seam. The Seahawks were one of the league's most frequent 12 personnel teams last season, with the Raiders using it more. That means Kubiak also will be creative in getting No. 2 tight end Michael Mayer involved as a receiver.

The Raiders, after trading Jakobi Meyers to the Jaguars in the middle of last season, are left with youngsters Tre Tucker, Jack Bech and Nailor as their best options at wide receiver. Las Vegas is hoping for a big breakout season from Bech, so he can be a key third playmaker to play off Jeanty and Bowers. Bech can be a complete outside receiver, and watch out for Nailor being a factor in the slot through the red zone. Tucker and Bech need to do better in stretching the field for Mendoza and Cousins. Nailor comes in with some big-play vertical potential inside, but he also proved to be a good red zone target while in Minnesota.

Bowers was headed to a monster second season but was limited to 12 games with a knee injury early and late, costing him games. He was on a 17-game pace of 91 catches for 963 yards and 10 TDs. He saw about seven targets per game. The Raiders went after Nailor knowing he would bring a different element inside than Bowers. The Raiders have a favorable

by Vinnie Iyer

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	MIAMI DOLPHINS	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Los Angeles Chargers	4:05 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at New Orleans Saints	4:25 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	4:25 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at New England Patriots	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	BUFFALO BILLS	4:25 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	LOS ANGELES RAMS	4:25 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at San Francisco 49ers	4:05 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	4:05 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Denver Broncos	4:25 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	at Cleveland Browns	1:00 p.m.
13		BYE WEEK	
14	Dec. 13	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	4:05 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	DENVER BRONCOS	4:25 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	TENNESSEE TITANS	4:05 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	at Arizona Cardinals	4:05 p.m.
18	TBD	at Kansas City Chiefs	TBD

Brock Bowers

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Kirk Cousins	Fernando Mendoza
RB	Ashton Jeanty	Mike Washington Jr.
WR	Tre Tucker	Dont'e Thornton Jr.
WR	Jalen Nailor	Malik Benson
WR	Jack Bech	Dareke Young
TE	Brock Bowers	Michael Mayer
LT	Kolton Miller	Charles Grant
LG	Spencer Burford	Atonio Mafi
C	Tyler Linderbaum	Trey Zuhn III
RG	Jackson Powers-Johnson	Jordan Meredith
RT	DJ Glaze	Dalton Wagner

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Thomas Booker IV	Brandon Cleveland
NT	Adam Butler	JJ Pegues
RDE	Jonah Laulu	Tonka Hemingway
WLB	Maxx Crosby	Kwity Paye
LILB	Nakobe Dean	Cody Lindenberg
RILB	Quay Walker	Tommy Eichenberg
SLB	Malcolm Koonce	Keyron Crawford
LCB	Eric Stokes	Chigozie Anusiem
SS	Jeremy Chinn	Dalton Johnson
FS	Isaiah Pola-Mao	Tristin McCollum
RCB	Darien Porter	Jermod McCoy

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Matt Gay	AJ Cole

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	1	QB	Fernando Mendoza
2	38	S	Treydan Stukes
3	67	DE	Keyron Crawford
3	91	C	Trey Zuhn III
4	101	CB	Jermod McCoy

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	6	RB	Ashton Jeanty
2	58	WR	Jack Bech
3	68	CB	Darien Porter
3	98	OT	Caleb Rogers
3	99	OT	Charles Grant

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	13	TE	Brock Bowers
2	44	OL	Jackson Powers-Johnson
3	77	T	Delmar Glaze
4	112	CB	Decamerion Richardson
5	148	LB	Tommy Eichenberg

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	7	EDGE	Tyree Wilson
2	35	TE	Michael Mayer
3	70	DT	Byron Young
3	100	WR	Tre Tucker
4	104	CB	Jakorian Bennett

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
3	90	OG	Dylan Parham
4	122	RB	Zamir White
4	126	DT	Neil Farrell Jr.
5	175	DT	Matthew Butler
7	238	OT	Thayer Munford

environment for their quarterbacks that will only get better. There was plenty of appeal for Kubiak, therefore, to leave the Super Bowl champs and attach the fate of his first head-coach gig to Mendoza living up to his potential. There is much that can translate well from what Kubiak did with Sam Darnold in Seattle to Las Vegas. The Seahawks were tied for No. 8 in the league with 57 pass plays of more than 20 yards per game last season. The Raiders had only 37, fourth-fewest. Between the running support, improved protection and a more reliable strong arm in either QB, the emphasis will be getting more explosive.

RUN DEFENSE

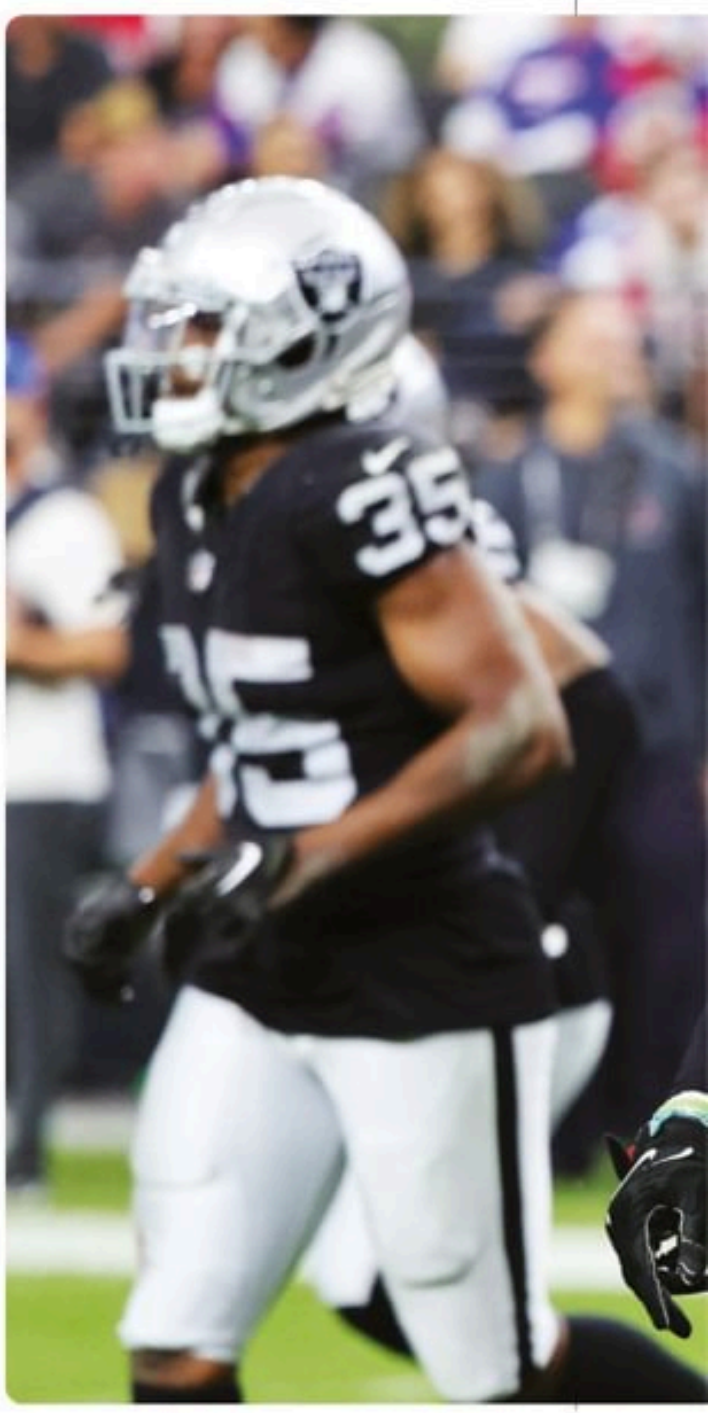
The Raiders fielded the No. 17 run defense in the NFL last season, allowing 116.8 rushing yards per game. But they also tied for second in allowing only 3.9 yards per carry. Opponents, however, often played with the lead on Las Vegas and averaged more than 30 rushes a game. Crosby is a devastating pass rusher, but he is an even better run stopper on the edge. Kubiak was smart to maintain a strength by elevating run game coordinator Rob Leonard to defensive coordinator.

Dean and Walker help replace Devin White and Jamal Adams in the middle of the defense. That's a good combination to hold up against the run while also providing a coverage upgrade. Paye is a welcome addition to help Malcolm Koonce on the outside. The front seven will remain well-coached with the sum of the team run defense being greater than its parts. The Raiders should expect to go up in run defense with the attempts against them going down with a more competitive offense. This is the gateway to allowing Crosby and the rest of the pass rush to get revved up for impact.

PASS DEFENSE

The Raiders finished in the top half of this category at No. 14 in the league. They were below mediocre with 37 sacks for No. 18. They also didn't make enough plays in coverage with only eight interceptions. Crosby often saw double-teams last season but still managed to hit double digits with 10 sacks. They also can get Koonce back on track as a solid secondary pass rusher. Paye also will be important in supplementing the production. Between Dean and Walker, Leonard has gained more blitzing power. Both of those linebackers are also assets in coverage.

The Raiders need their sources of pressure to be a little better so the big plays start to come.



As for the coverage, there is more playmaking promise with Eric Stokes and Johnson. No. 2 outside corner is the concern for stability, but they did draft Tennessee CB Jermod McCoy, who suffered the draft's biggest slide due to medical concerns with his knee. If healthy, he could provide a nice boost. The Raiders also need more vs. the pass from their safeties, led by former Panther Jeremy Chinn. The Raiders won't be confused for an elite pass defense because of their limitations in pass-rush depth and not having top-flight secondary players. But they are built to be more of a complementary force with the offense going from anemic to efficient.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Raiders have a top-flight punter in AJ Cole, a three-time Pro Bowler and two-time All-Pro. He has the highest yardage average (48.9) in NFL history. After years of some ups and downs, the Raiders replaced Daniel Carlson on kickoffs and field goals with well-traveled free-agent addition Matt Gay. They also have a new long snapper in former Ram Alex Ward. Rounding out the newcomers is their savvy special teams coach, Joe DeCamillis. Although the return game could be open to some competition with Tucker and backup running back Dylan Laube in the respective punt and kickoff runback rolls, DeCamillis' arrival promises a sound unit, the best since they had one-time interim coach Rich Bisaccia.

BOTTOM LINE

The Raiders went 3-14 last season, and although there is room to get worse, there should be every expectation they get closer to their division competition. The Broncos won't win 14 games again, but the Chiefs also should rebound from six wins. Mendoza and Jeanty with Kubiak will mean a clear, more efficient and higher-scoring offense from the 14.2 points per game debacle from last season. That alone should lead to a handful more wins. Look for a three-to-four game bump as the Raiders get on track to be a wild-card contender in Year 2 with Mendoza.

Malcolm Koonce

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Klint Kubiak
Former Seahawks offensive coordinator, 2025
Assistant head coach: Mike McCoy
Offensive coordinator: Andrew Janocko
Defensive coordinator: Rob Leonard
Special teams coordinator: Joe DeCamillis

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Mike Sullivan
Offensive pass game coordinator: Nick Holz
Offensive run game coordinator: Mario Jeberaeel
Running backs: Omar Young
Wide receivers: Zach Azzanni
Tight ends: Luke Steckel
Offensive line: Rick Dennison
Assistant offensive line: Ben Wilkerson
Offensive assistant: Tim Zetts

DEFENSE

Senior defensive assistant: Al Holcomb
Defensive line: Travis Smith
Assistant defensive line: Kenyon Jackson
Linebackers: Ronell Williams
Defensive backs: Joe Woods
Safeties: Matt Robinson
Defensive assistant: Steve Ferentz
Defensive quality control: Drew Gaither / Cody Grimm / Ketner Kupp

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	3–14	17.7%	1–5	2–7	1–7
2024–25	4–13	23.5%	0–6	2–6	2–7
2023–24	8–9	47.1%	4–2	6–3	2–6
2022–23	6–11	35.3%	3–3	4–4	2–7
2021–22	10–8	55.6%	3–3	5–4	5–4
2020–21	8–8	50.0%	4–2	2–6	6–2
2019–20	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–3	2–6
2018–19	4–12	25.0%	1–5	3–4	1–7
2017–18	6–10	37.5%	2–4	4–3	2–6
2016–17	12–5	70.6%	3–3	5–2	6–3
2015–16	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4
2014–15	3–13	18.8%	1–5	3–4	0–8
2013–14	4–12	25.0%	1–5	3–5	1–7
2012–13	4–12	25.0%	2–4	3–5	1–7
2011–12	8–8	50.0%	3–3	3–5	5–3
2010–11	8–8	50.0%	6–0	5–3	3–5
2009–10	5–11	31.3%	2–4	2–6	3–5
2008–09	5–11	31.3%	2–4	2–6	3–5
2007–08	4–12	25.0%	2–4	2–6	2–6
2006–07	2–14	12.5%	0–6	2–6	0–8

Justin Herbert

Los Angeles Chargers

The Chargers' first two seasons under coach Jim Harbaugh have had a similar feel. Their identical records to qualify as a back-to-back AFC wild-card team was 11-6. Each time, they were one-and-done in the playoffs with Justin Herbert struggling to be efficient in Greg Roman's offense. Harbaugh made a bold move to replace Roman, hiring fired former Dolphins head coach Mike McDaniel as the new offensive coordinator. With Jesse Minter leaving for the Ravens, Harbaugh also has a new defensive coordinator in Chris O'Leary.

The Chargers haven't shaken up their personnel too much, with interior offensive line and interior defensive line seeing the most notable changes. They are striving to build on those 11 wins with the ultimate goals of winning the AFC West and winning in the playoffs. The combination of McDaniel and O'Leary means Harbaugh gets a little more comfortable with new blood. Harbaugh has had time to evaluate what was and wasn't working in Los Angeles, with Herbert most in mind. In a very competitive division, he is hoping some schematic adjustments will lead to better clutch results, going two steps forward without a step back.

RUNNING GAME

Harbaugh saw his team run almost 45 percent of the time in his first season. That number went in the wrong direction, dropping to 42.3 percent last season. McDaniel can correct that by being more run-oriented in 2026, carrying over how he called plays for the Dolphins. Funny enough, the Chargers were No. 12 in rushing offense (121.6 average yards per game), while the Dolphins were No. 13 (120.2). Miami, however, averaged 4.7 yards per carry vs. 4.4 for Los Angeles under Roman. There's little question Harbaugh would love to win big while rushing closer to 500 times a season.

Had Najee Harris and rookie Omarion Hamption been healthy together for all of 2025, that goal might have been met. But Harris tore his Achilles early, and Hampton missed time with a midseason ankle fracture. During his nine healthy games, Hampton flashed the workhorse upside that made him a first-round draft pick. The Chargers didn't bring back Harris. With only former Ravens change of pace Keaton Mitchell added, they are counting on a big rebound from Hampton with Kimani Vidal being the strong top backup. Hampton is capable of handling 18 touches per game. De'Von Achane got 308 total for McDaniel in Miami last season and racked up 1,838 scrimmage yards and 12 TDs. Ahcane also led the league with his 5.7 yards per carry. Hampton has that kind of juice in a bigger frame.

The Chargers will hope they have starting offensive tackles Rashawn Slater and Joe Alt back healthy as both are elite outside run blockers. Center Tyler Biadasz was a good pickup early in free agency, but they need to worry about new guards Trevor Penning and Cole Strange, disappointments on their previous teams. Los Angeles has big expectations for Oronde Gadsden II as a receiving tight end, but the team was smart to add an ace blocker for the position in former Raven Charlie Kolar. The Chargers also added fullback Alec Ingold, who followed McDaniel from the Dolphins. They hope they have reinforced the trenches in front of Hampton to pave the way for a big season. Herbert needs to be facilitated in the downfield passing game, and a more productive and busier power running game can unlock more potential.

PASSING GAME

The Chargers were an average passing team with Herbert last season, averaging 212.2 yards per game while the QB averaged only 7.3 yards per attempt. That was a good dropoff from his career high of 7.7 in 2024. With Alt and Slater shelved, Herbert took a career-high 54 sacks, and his passer rating fell back to 94.3. After only three interceptions the year before, Herbert saw that total rocket up to 13. Seeing that regression, a change was needed. Before McDaniel dealt with a gunshy Tua Tagovailoa and called plays to protect him more, he did have consecutive seasons of more than 8.0 yards per attempt. That happened with top wide receivers Tyreek Hill and Jaylen Waddle making big plays after the catch.

The Chargers have Ladd McConkey, who averaged more than 14 yards per catch as a rookie two seasons ago. They also have No. 2 wide receiver Quentin Johnston, who averaged 14.4 yards per catch last season. Gadsden is also a field-stretcher at his position, with his number at 13.6. Herbert must do better in delivering big plays with that trio, assuming Alt and Slater give him top protection again. The Chargers were No. 19 with only 45 pass plays that went for 20 yards or more.

Omarion Hampton

by Vinnie Iyer

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	ARIZONA CARDINALS	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	4:05 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Buffalo Bills	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Seattle Seahawks	4:25 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	DENVER BRONCOS	4:05 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Kansas City Chiefs	4:25 p.m.
7		BYE WEEK	
8	Nov. 1	at Los Angeles Rams	4:05 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	HOUSTON TEXANS	4:05 p.m.
10	Nov. 16	at Baltimore Ravens	8:15 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	NEW YORK JETS	4:05 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	8:20 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:05 p.m.
15	Dec. 17	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	8:15 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	at Miami Dolphins	1:00 p.m.
17	TBD	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	TBD
18	TBD	at Denver Broncos	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Justin Herbert	Trey Lance
RB	Omarion Hampton	Kimani Vidal
WR	Ladd McConkey	Brenen Thompson
WR	Quentin Johnston	K. Lambert-Smith
WR	Tre' Harris	Derius Davis
TE	Oronde Gadsden	Charlie Kolar
LT	Rashawn Slater	Travis Burke
LG	Trevor Penning	Kayode Awosika
C	Tyler Biadasz	Josh Kaltenberger
RG	Jake Slaughter	Cole Strange
RT	Joe Alt	Trey Pipkins III

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Teair Tart	Josh Fuga
NT	Dalvin Tomlinson	Jamaree Caldwell
RDE	Justin Eboigbe	TeRah Edwards
WLB	Tuli Tuipulotu	Kyle Kennard
LILB	Daiyan Henley	Junior Colson
RILB	Denzel Perryman	Troy Dye
SLB	Khalil Mack	Akheem Mesidor
LCB	Cam Hart	Jordan Oladokun
SS	Derwin James Jr.	Tony Jefferson
FS	Elijah Molden	Genesis Smith
RCB	Donte Jackson	Deane Leonard

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Cameron Dicker	JK Scott

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	22	LB	Akheem Mesidor
2	63	C	Jake Slaughter
4	105	WR	Brenen Thompson
4	117	T	Travis Burke
4	131	S	Genesis Smith

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	22	RB	Omarion Hampton
2	55	WR	Tre Harris
3	86	DT	Jamaree Caldwell
4	125	LB	Kyle Kennard
5	158	WR	KeAndre Lambert-Smith

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	5	T	Joe Alt
2	34	WR	Ladd McConkey
3	69	LB	Junior Colson
4	105	DL	Justin Eboigbe
5	137	CB	Tarheeb Still

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	21	WR	Quentin Johnston
2	54	DE	Tuli Tuipulotu
3	85	LB	Daiyan Henley
4	125	WR	Deruis Davis
5	156	OG	Jordan McFadden

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	17	OG	Zion Johnson
3	79	S	JT Woods
4	123	RB	Isaiah Spiller
5	160	DT	Otito Ogbonnia
6	195	OG	Jamaree Salyer

Justin Eboigbe

The Chargers made a mistake by bringing back Keenan Allen and cutting into McConkey's slot work that allowed him to have an 82-reception, 1,149-yard rookie season. McDaniel got plenty of pop in the slot from Hill and Waddle for the Dolphins. Between McConkey and Gadsden stretching the middle of the field and Johnston getting vertical outside, Herbert has the right weapons to raise the big pass play quotient.

With the pressure raised via weaker protection, Herbert regressed and fed Allen as a security blanket. Without Allen, the 122 vacated targets will need to spread more to McConkey, Johnston and Gadsden, which in turn will have Herbert locked into looking at pushing the ball more downfield. Having a steady Hampton getting chunk runs will set up play-action well, and Herbert has the athleticism and arm to be rolled out and to throw well on the run. Should the Chargers play it right, Herbert will rack up more passing yards despite having fewer attempts.

RUN DEFENSE

The Chargers fielded the No. 8 run defense in the NFL at 105.4 average rushing yards allowed per game. They have one top run-stuffer up front in 3-4 end Teair Tart. They are also hoping Dalvin Tomlinson has something left to contribute at the nose. Los Angeles has average inside linebackers in Daiyan Henley and Denzel Perryman, so it was good for the team to bring back all-time great run defender Khalil Mack to their linebacker corps. Behind the front seven, the Chargers also have Derwin James to clean up at safety.

The team is solid and may not get much better in checking opponents on the ground, but there's no reason to believe there will be a regression against the run. While at Western Michigan, O'Leary had the No. 34 run defense among 136 teams in the entire FBS, with a MAC team stacking up to plenty of Power 5 programs. Harbaugh has been part of the "run the ball, stop the run" school for a long time. That's not just a philosophy, but rather a mandate.

PASS DEFENSE

The Chargers want to keep strong against the run, so they are well-positioned with their pass defense to make a lot of plays. They were No. 6 vs. the pass last season, allowing only 179.9 yards per game. They limited quarterbacks to 6.6 yards per attempt and 75.0 passer rating. They also tied for No. 10 in the league with 45 sacks and tied for No. 3 with 19 interceptions. The loss of Odafe Oweh in free agency to the Commanders was tough, but opposite Mack, Tuli Tuipulotu led the team with 13 sacks with defensive tackle Justin Eboigbe third with six ahead of Mack's 5.5. They also used their first round pick on Miami edge Akheem Mesidor at No. 22 overall. Oweh delivered 7.5 sacks in 12 games coming over from the Ravens, so they'll try to replace that with the current edge rotation. When the Chargers decide to bring back-seven pressure, Henley and James are their best assets there.

Mack is still bringing consistent heat on quarterbacks at 35. In the short term, he was the best solution to keep intact with Tuipoltu. The Chargers were one of the least frequent blitzing teams in the NFL, fewer than 20 percent of the time. They will once again focus on getting pressure with only four and dropping seven into coverage. Henley better contributes in that coverage than vs. the run. James is terrific at handling the toughest of tight end and back assignments when needed. Donte Jackson, the former Panther, has proven to be a fine acquisition with his combination of steady coverage and explosive plays on the ball, having led the team with four interceptions.

The Chargers had 23 takeaways last season, with many created by the pass defense. They could have dominated in turnover margin, but they also had 21 giveaways. They should feel good about the interception opportunities staying high and giving them more of an edge. Los Angeles has a strong multi-level game plan on defense, with a little lean toward spectacular. The Chargers can take over games against weaker QBs.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Chargers have the game's

Khalil Mack

most accurate kicker of all time in Cameron Dicker, who tops the list in converting 94.3 of his career field-goal attempts so far. He is money in big moments with a big range. He remains an important weapon in what figures to be a season full of more close games in AFC West play.

JK Scott gives them stability at punter, entering his fifth season with the team. Derius Davis is in line to return punts but Mitchell, when not providing a change of pace to Hampton, will give the team more of an explosive spark on kickoff returns. Harbaugh did keep special teams coordinator Ryan Ficken, who has emerged as one of the league's best in his two seasons since coming over from the Vikings.

BOTTOM LINE

No one should be surprised if the Chargers go 11-6 again. No one should be surprised if suddenly, that regular-season record is good enough to win the West. Harbaugh has made them a consistent winner, so it now comes down to Herbert getting over that playoff hump. Harbaugh can feel confident that his complete defense will provide a high floor under O'Leary. The running game also is set up for bigger things with a heavier attack, health-willing. With those staples, the attention turns to Herbert to find a way to get more aggressive to make big plays but also cut down on big mistakes.

Herbert is used to a constant change with his coordinators. McDaniel would seem to be the best fit to mesh Harbaugh's running mentality with the potential for more big plays in the passing game. Los Angeles figures to make the AFC tournament as at least a wild card. Harbaugh will expect the Chargers to build on their successes and grow from the two years of falling short. If not, the Chargers might be stuck in an uncomfortable QB purgatory with Herbert.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Jim Harbaugh
First season with Chargers: 2024
Regular-season record with Chargers: 22–12 (64.7%)
Offensive coordinator: Mike McDaniel
Defensive coordinator: Chris O'Leary
Special teams coordinator: Ryan Ficken

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Shane Day
Running backs: Max McCaffrey
Wide receivers: Sanjay Lal
Tight ends: Chandler Henley
Offensive line: Butch Barry
Assistant offensive line: Nick Hardwick
Passing game specialist: Adam Gase
Offensive assistants: Kirk Campbell / Rob Everett / Josh Hammond

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Mike Elston
Assistant defensive line: Julian Campenni
Linebackers: Sean Spence
Outside linebackers: Dylan Roney
Assistant outside linebackers: Denzel Martin
Defensive backs: Steve Clinkscale
Safeties: Adam Fuller
Defensive assistant: Mike Hiestand

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	11–7	61.1%	5–1	5–3	5–4
2024–25	11–7	61.1%	4–2	5–3	6–4
2023–24	5–12	29.4%	1–5	2–7	3–5
2022–23	10–8	55.6%	2–4	5–3	5–5
2021–22	9–8	52.9%	3–3	5–4	4–4
2020–21	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2019–20	5–11	31.3%	0–6	2–5	3–5
2018–19	13–5	72.2%	4–2	4–3	8–2
2017–18	9–7	56.3%	3–3	5–3	4–4
2016–17	5–11	31.3%	1–5	3–5	2–6
2015–16	4–12	25.0%	0–6	3–5	1–7
2014–15	9–7	56.3%	2–4	5–3	4–4
2013–14	10–8	55.6%	4–3	5–3	5–5
2012–13	7–9	43.8%	4–2	3–5	4–4
2011–12	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–5
2010–11	9–7	56.3%	3–3	6–2	3–5
2009–10	13–4	76.5%	5–1	6–3	7–1
2008–09	9–9	50.0%	5–1	6–3	3–5
2007–08	13–6	68.4%	5–1	8–1	5–5
2006–07	14–3	82.4%	5–1	8–1	6–2

Dallas Cowboys

America's Team has now gone 30 years without a Super Bowl championship, but that's not really the worst part. There was a time when a drought like that would have been unthinkable. Now it's accepted as the Cowboys' norm. And whether the drought has a chance to end any time soon depends on which side of the ball you're looking at. On offense, the Cowboys have a dazzling array of talent, capable of putting up points in huge bunches and out-scoring any team in the league. On defense, the Cowboys have a deeply flawed unit, vulnerable on three levels, and capable of blowing enough games to keep the team out of the playoffs entirely.

Jerry Jones promised to spend whatever he had to spend to fix that, but then once again slogged his way through a quiet offseason. And his defense, in many ways, is still reeling from the loss of Micah Parsons, who was traded away last summer. His departure immediately made the Cowboys' defense worse and there are no signs that it's gotten any better. That makes them the same team they were, until proven otherwise: Great offense. Terrible defense. And a team that's still got work to do to make another run at its first Super Bowl season since 1995.

RUNNING GAME

The most surprising part of the Cowboys' offense last season was the emergence of running back Javonte Williams. It was something of a risk the year before when they let Rico Dowdle go and brought in Williams, who had never topped 1,000 yards and had been declining in Denver. But he rewarded their faith with a solid 1,201-yard, 11-touchdown season. And though it wasn't exactly spectacular—Williams had just two 100-yard games—it was a sign that the Cowboys were committed to the run under first-year head coach Brian Schottenheimer. He knew he had a dazzling array of weapons in the passing game, but he understood that the Cowboys

still needed a base of strength on the ground.

A lot of that, of course, was due to a strong and improving offensive line that is more than solid from 1-5. They even managed to survive injuries to left tackle Tyler Guyton and center Cooper Beebe, in part because they got an excellent rookie season from right guard Tyler Booker. They were exceptionally strong in the interior of the line, which aided Williams on those inside runs. There's no reason to think that won't be even better in 2026. Williams just got a three-year, $24 million contract, and he's still only 26 years old with seemingly low mileage on his legs. Plus, with the Cowboys so dynamic in their passing attack, defenses simply can't afford to stack the box against him. As long as Dak Prescott is cooking at quarterback, Williams will almost always have room to run.

The question is how much they'll run. Despite their commitment to the run, the Cowboys actually passed on 655 of their 1,120 plays last season—58.5 percent of the time. That was at least partially because of the strength of their passing game, but also because of the weakness of their defense. When their defense was giving up early points, the Cowboys were getting behind, and they needed to air it out to catch up. But when the rushing attack is needed, there's no doubt it's there for the Cowboys. And Williams looks like he's the most dynamic back they've had in several years.

PASSING GAME

If you only watched the Dallas passing attack, you'd be convinced they weren't just a Super Bowl contender, they might even be a Super Bowl favorite. Yes, Prescott is really that good at quarterback. And yes, CeeDee Lamb is one of the best and most prolific receivers in the league. And yes, it's crazy that George Pickens is now their second receiver, since he'd be the first on most teams in the league. And that's before getting to tight end Jake Ferguson, who had 82 catches and eight touchdowns last season. He only turned those catches into 600 yards, so he's not exactly an explosive receiver. But he's a reliable target and someone who is huge in the red zone. That's a nice complement to the other weapons the Cowboys have. And those weapons include an array of third options like Ryan Flournoy (40-475-4), KaVontae Turpin (26-396-2) and Jalen Tolbert (18-203-1). They are a diverse attack that can beat teams in a variety of ways, and averaged 266.3 passing yards last season, good for second in the NFL. And all three of those receivers are capable of stepping up into a bigger role in case of injury, at least for a few games at a time.

With all that talent and their recent production, there's still a feeling that they've only scratched the surface. Last season was their first with Pickens, who caught 93 passes for 1,429 yards and nine touchdowns while mostly playing second fiddle to Lamb. And Lamb caught 75 passes for 1,077 yards and three touchdowns—good, but by far his worst season since his rookie year thanks to a high ankle sprain that cost him three early season games and seemed to linger all season long. Imagine Lamb at full strength, Pickens comfortable in the offense, along with all the other weapons the

Dak Prescott

by Frank Woodworth

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at New York Giants	8:20 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	4:25 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	vs. Baltimore (in Rio de Janeiro)	4:25 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Houston Texans	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 8	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	8:15 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Green Bay Packers	8:20 p.m.
7	Oct. 26	at Philadelphia Eagles	8:15 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	ARIZONA CARDINALS	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at Indianapolis Colts	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	4:25 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	TENNESSEE TITANS	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 26	PHILADELPHIA EAGLES	4:30 p.m.
13	Dec. 7	at Seattle Seahawks	8:15 p.m.
14		BYE WEEK	
15	Dec. 20	at Los Angeles Rams	4:25 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	8:20 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	NEW YORK GIANTS	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at Washington Commanders	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Dak Prescott	Joe Milton III
RB	Javonte Williams	Malik Davis
WR	CeeDee Lamb	KaVontae Turpin
WR	George Pickens	Jonathan Mingo
WR	Ryan Flournoy	Parris Campbell
TE	Jake Ferguson	Brevyn Spann-Ford
LT	Tyler Smith	Tyler Guyton
LG	T.J. Bass	Trevor Keegan
C	Cooper Beebe	Matt Hennessy
RG	Tyler Booker	-
RT	Terence Steele	Ajani Cornelius

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Quinnen Williams	Tyrus Wheat
NT	Otito Ogbonnia	Jay Toia
RDE	Kenny Clark	Jonathan Bullard
WLB	Rashan Gary	Jaishawn Barham
LILB	DeMarvion Overshown	Dee Winters
RILB	Shemar James	Marist Liufau
SLB	Donovan Ezeiruaku	Malachi Lawrence
LCB	Shavon Revel Jr.	Caelen Carson
SS	Jalen Thompson	Markquese Bell
FS	Malik Hooker	P.J. Locke
RCB	DaRon Bland	Cobie Durant

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Brandon Aubrey	Bryan Anger

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	11	S	Caleb Downs
1	23	DE	Malachi Lawrence
3	92	OLB	Jaishawn Barham
4	112	T	Drew Shelton
4	114	CB	Devin Moore

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	12	G	Tyler Booker
2	44	DE	Donovan Ezeiruaku
3	76	CB	Shavon Revel
5	149	RB	Jaydon Blue
5	152	LB	Shemar James

2024

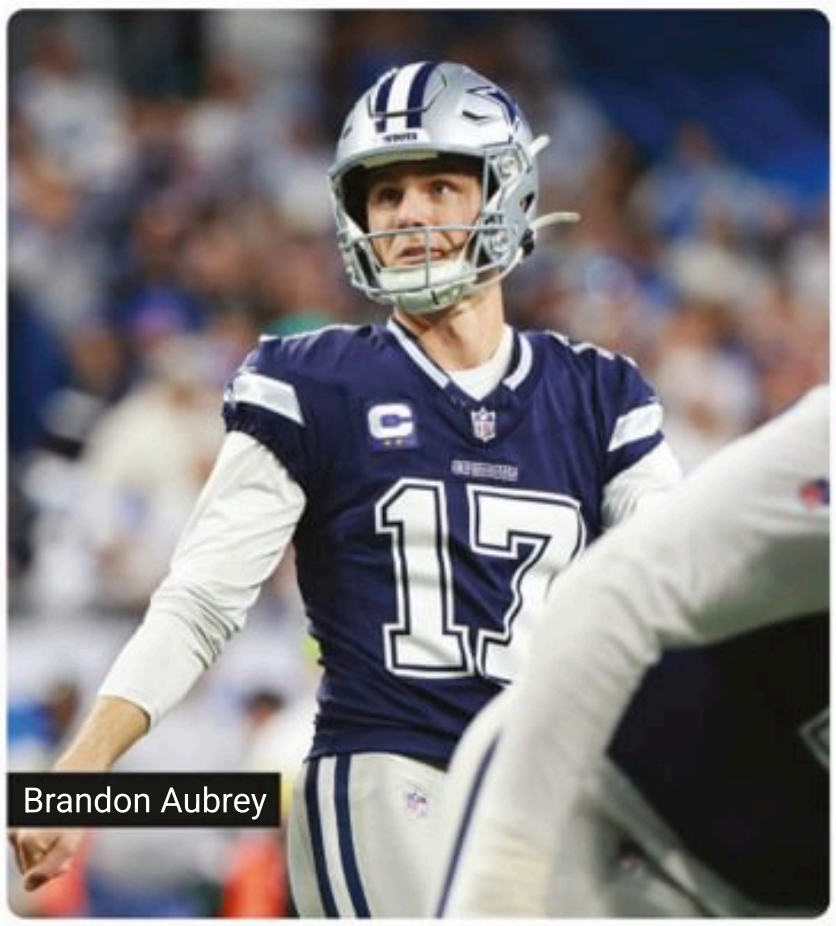
Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	29	OT	Tyler Guyton
2	56	EDGE	Marshawn Kneeland
3	73	G	Cooper Beebe
3	87	LB	Marist Liufau
5	174	CB	Caelen Carson

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	26	DT	Mazi Smith
2	58	TE	Luke Schoonmaker
3	90	LB	DeMarvion Overshown
4	129	EDGE	Viliami Fehoko
5	169	OT	Asim Richards

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	24	OT	Tyler Smith
2	56	DE	Sam Williams
3	88	WR	Jalen Tolbert
4	129	TE	Jake Ferguson
5	155	OT	Matt Waletzko



Brandon Aubrey

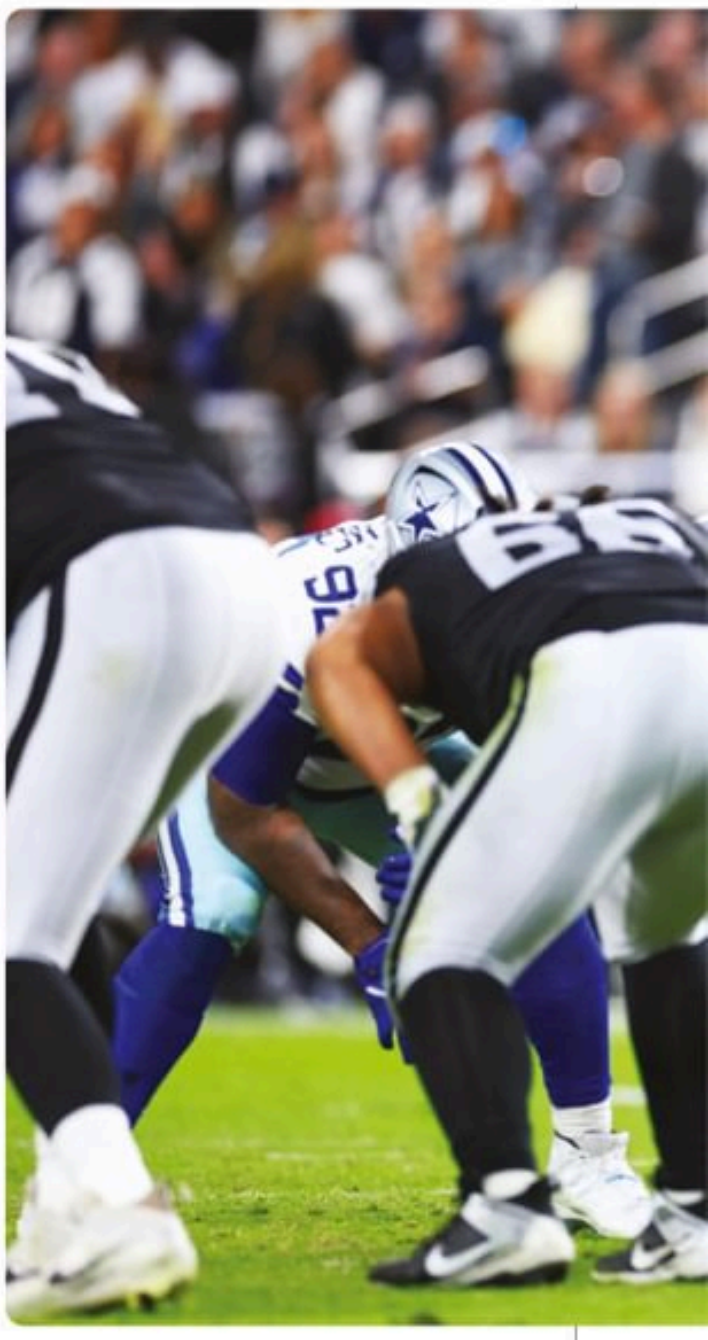
Cowboys have. And Prescott even erased some doubts about himself last season with a bounce-back year that included 4,552 passing yards, 30 touchdowns and just 10 interceptions. And he might still be getting better.

So all the ingredients are there, including a strong line that mostly kept the pressure off Prescott, who was only sacked 31 times (the 11th fewest among teams in the league). There's no reason this passing attack won't be at least as prolific, if not better if they can stay healthy and everyone settles in. Their only issue is the burden placed on their shoulders. Their defense is so porous that big passing numbers aren't just expected, they are necessary for the Cowboys to stay in games. Too often, their only path to victory is to win in a shootout, and that's a hard level to sustain. This offense might be capable of that, though. They really are dynamic. And if they ever get help from the other side of the ball, this Cowboys team could really put on a show.

RUN DEFENSE

For all the criticism of Jerry Jones' wheeling and dealing, this is the one area where he may be right: The Cowboys' decision to trade Micah Parsons, and their subsequent moves, might actually make them better against the run. Not that Parsons was bad against the run by any means, but the key player in that trade for the Cowboys—defensive tackle Kenny Clark—was brought in specifically to be a big run-stuffer in the middle of that defense. And with Parsons off the books, Jones was then able to afford the trade for defensive tackle Quinnen Williams, giving the Cowboys a brick wall in the middle of their defensive line.

They even made another trade for defensive end Rashan Gary. And while he's expected to help out the Cowboys' sagging pass rush, he's actually a better run defender than he is an edge rusher. The addition of safety Jalen Thompson, a reliable tackler and smart defender who signed in free agency, should be a boost to the run defense, too. Jones expects all that to have a cascade effect that turns the Cowboys into an elite defense. That might be a bit of a stretch, but it's not unreasonable to expect an improvement. The Cowboys gave up 125.5 yards per



game on the ground last season, which ranked them 23rd overall. They now have the talent to be a lot better than that.

PASS DEFENSE

The Cowboys had the worst pass defense in the NFL last season, and there were a lot of reasons for that—they had injuries, their coverage was bad, their scheme was questionable and their pass rush was non-existent. So did they get any better in the offseason? That depends on how much of an impact will be made by their two first-round draft picks. Safety Caleb Downs, a versatile defender who excelled in both pass coverage and against the run while at Ohio State, is expected to be a Week 1 starter. Edge rusher Malachi Lawrence, the draft's No. 23 overall pick, is more likely to start the season as a situational player.

The addition of Thompson at safety helps. The Cowboys signed cornerback Cobie Durant, who isn't exactly a perfect replacement for the departed Trevon Diggs. They're counting on the health and resurgeance of CB DaRon Bland. They also expect Rashan Gary to boost their pass rush, even though

Kenny Clark

none of his 7.5 sacks last season came during his last nine games. But mostly they believe a scheme change will make all the difference in the world. Gone is their embattled defensive coordinator, Matt Eberflus. In his place is Christian Parker, the former Eagles secondary coach who is now the third Cowboys defensive coordinator in the last three seasons. He is an expert in disguising coverages and working with the secondary, which theoretically could be a big boost to a defense that gave up a league-worst 251.5 passing yards per game last season.

They desperately need to find a pass rush, though. They don't have a single returning player who had more than 5.5 sacks last season. Parsons was always good for double that, and his disruptive presence kept quarterbacks off their games. Dallas simply does not have a player like that anymore.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Brandon Aubrey was only 11 of 17 on field goals of 50 yards or longer last season, and the fact that it was shocking and considered a disappointment shows how high he's set the bar. He still has arguably the strongest leg among NFL kickers, and is among the most reliable in the game—even from long range. Since he was 24 of 27 from 50 and beyond in his first two seasons, the dip is worth watching, but nothing to be concerned about yet. The Cowboys also have a Pro Bowl punter and Turpin is a Pro Bowl returner. So as long as Aubrey's blip was temporary, the Dallas special teams are still very good.

BOTTOM LINE

They have the offense to carry them to the playoffs, and maybe deep into January, but how far they actually go really depends on their defense. Their offense is so potent that even an average defensive performance could be enough to make the Cowboys one of the four or five best teams in the NFC. But based on last year, an average defense would be an enormous step up. If they get there, though—if they really can stuff the run, if they can find a bit of a pass rush and if Parker's scheme is what they need—there's no reason they can't win 10 games and reach the playoffs. If not, the Super Bowl drought will easily reach Year 31.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Brian Schottenheimer
First season with Cowboys: 2025
Regular-season record with Cowboys: 7–9–1 (44.1%)
Offensive coordinator: Klayton Adams
Defensive coordinator: Christian Parker
Special teams coordinator: Nick Sorensen

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Steve Shimko
Running backs: Derrick Foster
Assistant running backs: Jamel Mutunga
Wide receivers: Junior Adams
Assistant wide receivers: Stephen Bravo-Brown
Tight ends: Lunda Wells
Offensive line: Conor Riley
Assistant offensive line/quality control: Kyle Fuller
Pass game specialist: Ken Dorsey

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Marcus Dixon
Assistant defensive line: Demeitre Brim
Outside linebackers: Chidera Uzo-Diribe
Inside linebackers: Scott Symons
Assistant linebackers: J.J. Clark
Defensive backs/pass game coordinator: Derrick Ansley
Secondary: Ryan Smith
Assistant secondary: Robert Muschamp

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	7–9–1	43.8%	4–2	4–3–1	3–6
2024–25	7–10	41.2%	3–3	2–7	5–3
2023–24	12–6	66.7%	5–1	8–1	4–5
2022–23	13–6	68.4%	4–2	8–1	5–5
2021–22	12–6	66.7%	6–0	5–4	7–2
2020–21	6–10	37.5%	2–4	4–4	2–6
2019–20	8–8	50.0%	5–1	5–3	3–5
2018–19	11–7	61.1%	5–1	8–1	3–6
2017–18	9–7	56.3%	5–1	3–5	6–2
2016–17	13–4	76.5%	3–3	7–2	6–2
2015–16	4–12	25.0%	3–3	1–7	3–5
2014–15	13–5	72.2%	4–2	5–4	7–1
2013–14	8–8	50.0%	5–1	5–3	3–5
2012–13	8–8	50.0%	3–3	4–4	4–4
2011–12	8–8	50.0%	2–4	5–3	3–5
2010–11	6–10	37.5%	3–3	2–6	4–4
2009–10	12–6	66.7%	5–2	7–2	5–4
2008–09	9–7	56.3%	3–3	6–2	3–5
2007–08	13–4	76.5%	4–3	6–3	7–1
2006–07	9–8	52.9%	2–4	4–4	5–4

New York Giants

For a team that just fired its coach, almost fired its general manager and just had double-digit losses (4-13) for the 10th time in the last 12 years, there sure is a lot of optimism in New York these days. And the Giants don't just have John Harbaugh to thank for that. Sure, the arrival of Harbaugh, after 18 mostly stellar seasons with the Baltimore Ravens, is a reason to celebrate. The Giants haven't had a coach with his resume since they said goodbye to Tom Coughlin in 2015. He brought instant credibility and respectability to the franchise, as well as a belief that they'll be a well-coached team for a change.

But it's really about more than that. They have a promising young quarterback in Jaxson Dart, and an array of other talented players like receiver Malik Nabers and edge rushers Abdul Carter and Brian Burns. They look like a team ready to finally arrive, with enough talent to rescue a floundering franchise. Harbaugh was just the final piece to a puzzle that no one's been able to assemble for the last decade. The Giants believe their time is finally arriving. Maybe not this year, but definitely soon.

RUNNING GAME

If there's one thing the Giants are sure Harbaugh wants to bring with him from Baltimore, it's a strong rushing attack. He always had one with the Ravens, especially after they added Derrick Henry. And he relied on having a quarterback who could run well, too. He's certainly got that in Dart, who ran for 487 yards and nine touchdowns in his 12 starts last season. He ran so much, in fact, that it was controversial since he took way too many hits and had to be pulled from games to be checked for a concussion five times. But Harbaugh isn't likely to rein him in, though he might tweak his over-aggressive style. Dart is still going to be a big part of the Giants' rushing attack.

The other big part of it will depend on several factors, mostly the health of running back Cam Skattebo, who suffered a gruesome ankle injury in Week 8 last season. He was a jolt of energy for the Giants, rushing for 410 yards and five touchdowns in his eight games. But after surgery to repair a dislocated ankle, fractured fibula and a torn ligament, his status is somewhat

Jaxson Dart

by Frank Woodworth

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	DALLAS COWBOYS	8:20 p.m.
2	Sept. 21	at Los Angeles Rams	8:15 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	TENNESSEE TITANS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	ARIZONA CARDINALS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Washington Commanders	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Houston Texans	1:00 p.m.
8		BYE WEEK	
9	Nov. 8	at Philadelphia Eagles	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 12	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	8:15 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	at Indianapolis Colts	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Seattle Seahawks	4:25 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 28	at Detroit Lions	8:15 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	at Dallas Cowboys	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	PHILADELPHIA EAGLES	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Jaxson Dart	Jameis Winston
RB	Cam Skattebo	Tyrone Tracy Jr.
WR	Malik Nabers	Calvin Austin III
WR	Darius Slayton	Malachi Fields
WR	Darnell Mooney	Isaiah Hodgins
TE	Isaiah Likely	Theo Johnson
LT	Andrew Thomas	J.C. Davis
LG	Jon Runyan	Aaron Stinnie
C	John Michael Schmitz	-
RG	Francis Mauigoa	Daniel Faalele
RT	Jermaine Eluemunor	-

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Roy Robertson-Harris	Bobby Jamison-Travis
NT	Sam Roberts	-
RDE	Darius Alexander	Marlon Tuipulotu
WLB	Brian Burns	Chauncey Golston
LILB	Arvell Reese	Swayze Bozeman
RILB	Tremaine Edmunds	Micah McFadden
SLB	Kayvon Thibodeaux	Abdul Carter
LCB	Paulson Adebo	Colton Hood
SS	Tyler Nubin	Jason Pinnock
FS	Jevon Holland	Elijah Campbell
RCB	Greg Newsome II	Deonte Banks

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Jason Sanders	Jordan Stout

in doubt. The Giants could rely on Tyrone Tracy, who led the team with 740 rushing yards, but he isn't the punishing rusher that Skattebo was, or that Harbaugh seems to like. The Giants didn't add to the running back room in the draft, so Devin Singletary appears to be the third option in the backfield.

But one way or another, expect the Giants to run. They might even be able to do it with some consistency thanks to an offensive line that has been steadily and finally improving over the last couple of years. They are particularly strong at tackle, with Andrew Thomas on the left and Jermaine Eluemunor on the right. The key to the interior will be getting improvement from third-year center John Michael Schmitz and immediate contributions at guard from Francis Mauigoa, the 10th overall pick in April's draft. Don't expect the Giants to run like the Ravens right away, but do expect them to try. That's the Harbaugh Way. It's also why he brought Patrick Ricard, his brusing Baltimore fullback, along with him. He loves his young quarterback and he knows he has other offensive weapons. But he's not ready to let Dart carry the team all by himself, just like he never really let Lamar Jackson do that in Baltimore. Harbaugh wants to build a team that wears defenses down with brute strength and a punishing runner. That's what the Giants will try to do.

PASSING GAME

The Giants really thought they had a replacement for Eli Manning in Daniel Jones, and as recently as 2022 it looked like they might be right. But the weight of injuries and expectations collapsed on his fragile body, sending the Giants spiraling into quarterback hell. But then came Dart, the great hope that the Giants traded back into the first round to grab in 2025. He almost immediately raised expectations and even forced his way into the lineup last season by Week 3. By the end of the season, the Giants and their fans couldn't wait to see more.

Some caution is needed, though, because Dart proved to be an extremely exciting playmaker and a capable passer, but it's not like he lit the league on fire with his right arm. His numbers were good—2,272 yards, 15 touchdowns, 5 interceptions,

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	5	LB	Arvell Reese
1	10	G	Francis Mauigoa
2	37	CB	Colton Hood
3	74	WR	Malachi Fields
6	186	DT	Bobby Jamison-Travis

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	3	DE	Abdul Carter
1	25	QB	Jaxson Dart
3	65	DT	Darius Alexander
4	105	RB	Cam Skattebo
5	154	G	Marcus Mbow

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	6	WR	Malik Nabers
2	47	S	Tyler Nubin
3	70	CB	Andru Phillips
4	107	TE	Theo Johnson
5	166	RB	Tyrone Tracy

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	24	CB	Deonte Banks
2	57	C	John Michael Schmitz
3	73	WR	Jalin Hyatt
5	172	RB	Eric Gray
6	209	CB	Tre Hawkins

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	5	DE	Kayvon Thibodeaux
1	7	OT	Evan Neal
2	43	WR	Wan'Dale Robinson
3	67	G	Joshua Ezeudu
3	81	CB	Cordale Flott

and a 63.7 completion percentage in 12 games—but hardly great. He didn't have a single game with 250 passing yards and only one with more than two touchdowns. Of course, he also did all of that without his No. 1 receiver, Malik Nabers, who tore his ACL in just his second game with Dart. That was a huge loss considering the lack of other weapons the Giants had. His best receiver after that was Wan'Dale Robinson, who stands only 5-foot-8.

The expectation for 2026 is that Nabers will be back and that he and Dart will become a dynamic duo, capable of combining for more than 1,000 yards. It might take some time for Nabers to round back into form, but he certainly has the talent to eventually become one of the truly elite receivers in the game. The Giants also added some other weapons to help. They brought in veteran receiver Darnell Mooney, who is coming off a terrible season in Atlanta but may be still capable of 50 catches and 600 yards. And they signed Calvin Austin, who might be a less productive version of Robinson in the slot, but at least stands an inch taller.

Maybe the biggest acquisition is tight end Isaiah Likely, another Raven to follow Harbaugh up I-95. He is a promising, pass-catching talent who was buried at times behind Mark Andrews in Baltimore. The 6-foot-4, 245-pounder is only 26 years old and has the potential to be an elite tight end if he gets the opportunity in New York that he seems to expect. They key to all of it, of course, is Dart. Harbaugh, and his new offensive coordinator Matt Nagy, still need to figure out exactly what their young quarterback is capable of doing, especially with a good, but not great, cast around him. He should get decent protection, and elite receiving from Nabers and Likely. But the rest of the group is a big unknown.

And so, really, is Dart. Yes, he can make plays with his feet, but he needs to be able to make more plays with his arm to really prove he's a worthy successor to Manning. There's still plenty of time for that, of course, and Harbaugh is likely to keep him well-protected by running a ground-based offense. If they're going to make a run at the playoffs, though, big passing games from Dart will be needed. And Harbaugh and the Giants believe he's capable of that whenever the time comes.

RUN DEFENSE

The best thing that can be said about the Giants' run defense last season was that it wasn't as bad as the Cowboys'. But that's really it. Because it was mostly terrible all season long. Ask the Giants why, and it was mostly about the scheme of their former defensive coordinator, Shane Bowen, which never really clicked in. It didn't help that since-departed middle linebacker Bobby Okereke had a down season. And star defensive tackle Dexter Lawrence, the anchor in the middle of their line, had a season that was an even bigger disappointment, which prompted the Giants to trade him to Cincinnati for that 10th overall draft pick that New York used on Francis Mauigoa.

Fixing the run defense is coordinator Dennard Wilson's job, and he appears to have the tools to do so. Improvement from last year's rookie linebacker Abdul Carter will be key, and so too will immediate contributions from versatile linebacker Arvell Reese, the fifth overall selection in April's draft.

It also should be a boost that the Giants signed middle linebacker Tremaine Edmunds to take Okereke's place. At 28, Edmunds is younger and faster than Okereke and one of the more consistent tacklers in the league. But Wilson is the key, since he is believed to be switching the Giants to a

Brian Burns

Roy Robertson-Harris

defense that involves more 3-4 alignments. The quicker they pick that up, the better chance they'll have of being the run-stuffing defense that Harbaugh expects them to be.

PASS DEFENSE

It's a bit surprising that the Giants' pass defense wasn't more of a strength for them last season, because they certainly had the players to make it better. With Brian Burns, Abdul Carter and Kayvon Thibodeaux they have the makings of a really dangerous pass rush. And their secondary is filled with solid veterans like safety Jevon Holland and corner Paulson Adebo, though both battled injuries last year.

But the Giants know that their pass defense is only as good as their pass rush, and that was surprisingly lacking. Burns was a stud with 16.5 sacks—by far his career high. Nobody else has more than four. Wilson is expected to build a more aggressive, attacking defense that will change all that. Carter and Thibodeaux, who was also hurt for nearly half of last season, shouldn't lag that far behind Burns in the sack numbers. The Giants think they have the horses to create relentless pressure on opposing quarterbacks. They are probably right. They just need the right scheme to unleash it.

The secondary still has holes, of course. They signed Greg Newsome, who has tantalizing talent but has struggled for most of his five NFL seasons. They used the 37th overall pick of April's draft on Colton Hood, who spent last season at Tennessee after having transferred from Colorado. And safety Tyler Nubin and corner Dru Phillips are still more about potential than performance. But they will all look a lot better if the Giants can consistently force quarterbacks to make bad decisions. That's something they absolutely should be able to do.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Harbaugh, a former special teams coach, wasted no time in revamping the Giants' special teams once he arrived. He brought former Ravens punter Jordan Stout with him, after watching him lead the NFL with a 44.9-yard net average last season. And he replaced the oft-injured Graham Gano with underrated kicker Jason Sanders, who made a career-best 90.2 percent of his field goals last season, including 12 of 14 from beyond 50 yards. The one big holdover was return man Gunner Olszewski, a tough and underrated returner who knows how to get the hard extra yards.

BOTTOM LINE

The Giants would love to be one of those worst-to-first teams under their new coach, and if everything goes right it's probably not out of the question. A more reasonable goal would be something they've rarely seen since the Coughlin era—competitive football and important games in December. This team, at full strength, is good, but it's not very deep. They probably need everything to go right for them at all times. But there's enough talent for them to be a .500 team and stay in the playoff race right until the end. It may not be everything they want, but it'll be a big step in the right direction after years of falling back.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: John Harbaugh
Went 180–113 (61.4%) as Ravens head coach, 2008–25
Went 13–11 (54.2%) in post-season as Ravens head coach
Offensive coordinator: Matt Nagy
Defensive coordinator: Dennard Wilson
Special teams coordinator: Chris Horton

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks/pass game coordinator: Brian Callahan
Running backs: Willie Taggart
Wide receivers: Chad Hall
Tight ends: Tim Kelly
Offensive line: Mike Bloomgren
Assistant offensive line: Grant Newsome
Senior offensive assistant: Greg Roman
Offensive quality control: Adam Schrack / Mike Snyder
Football analyst/quality control: Noah Riley

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Dennis Johnson
Outside linebackers/run game coordinator: Charlie Bullen
Inside linebackers: Frank Bush
Assistant linebackers: Matt Pees
Secondary/pass game coordinator: Donald D'Alesio
Defensive backs: Addison Lynch
Defensive quality control: Brendan Clark

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	4–13	23.5%	2–4	3–5	1–8
2024–25	3–14	17.7%	0–6	1–8	2–5
2023–24	6–11	35.3%	3–3	4–4	2–7
2022–23	10–8–1	55.6%	1–5–1	5–3–1	4–5
2021–22	4–13	23.5%	1–5	3–5	1–8
2020–21	6–10	37.5%	4–2	3–5	3–5
2019–20	4–12	25.0%	2–4	2–6	2–6
2018–19	5–11	31.3%	1–5	2–6	3–5
2017–18	3–13	18.8%	1–5	2–6	1–7
2016–17	11–6	64.7%	4–2	7–1	3–5
2015–16	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2014–15	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2013–14	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2012–13	9–7	56.3%	3–3	6–2	3–5
2011–12	13–7	65.0%	3–3	5–4	7–3
2010–11	10–6	62.5%	3–3	5–3	5–3
2009–10	8–8	50.0%	4–2	4–4	4–4
2008–09	12–5	70.6%	4–3	7–2	5–3
2007–08	14–6	70.0%	4–3	3–5	9–1
2006–07	8–9	47.1%	4–3	3–5	5–4

Philadelphia Eagles

Over the last four seasons, the Eagles have won three division titles and been to two Super Bowls, winning one, so there is little question they are the "Beasts of the East." They still have most of the key components from the team that won Super Bowl 59, including their All-Pro quarterback (Jalen Hurts) and running back (Saquon Barkley). And they retained most of a defense that ranked fifth overall in 2025.

But the Eagles are still at a crossroads after last season was more of a struggle than they hoped, and ended with a bitter, first-round disappointment in the playoffs. Head coach Nick Sirianni might even be on the hot seat, despite being one of the most accomplished head coaches in the league. That's because the standards and expectations have become extremely high in Philadelphia—it's almost Super Bowl or bust. At the very least, after a somewhat quiet offseason, they expect the team to be able to make a Super Bowl run. Anything less has become almost unacceptable. In fact, if they fall short again, their next offseason could be filled with change.

RUNNING GAME

This has been the Eagles' strength for as long as anyone can remember, and it turned into a super power when they signed Barkley away from the Giants in 2024. He found a new lease on his NFL life running behind the massive Philly offensive line, which led to a 2,000-yard season and the first Super Bowl championship of his career. But that was a long two years ago. Last season was a nightmare by Barkley's standards. His production was nearly cut in half, as he rushed for "only" 1,140 yards. The offensive line started

to show its age in front of him, suffering through injuries and failing to dominate as much as they had in previous years. The challenge this season will be to revive that, but it won't be easy.

Sirianni has put his offense in the hands of new, inexperienced, and very young (33) offensive coordinator Sean Mannion. And Mannion will have to work without a safety net of sorts, after legendary offensive line coach Jeff Stoutland decided to leave after his role was diminished. Don't underestimate the impact of the loss of Stoutland, either. He is worshipped by most of the linemen he coached, and has been widely credited as the reason the Eagles' line has dominated the league for so long. The line still has plenty of talent, but it will be a tough task for Chris Kuper to fill Stoutland's beloved shoes.

It doesn't help that the line has had some age and injury issues, particularly at right tackle where Lane Johnson is 36 and battled a series of injuries last year. They'll need improvement from center Cam Jurgens and right guard Tyler Steen, too. That's all because Barkley is the key to their offense, and he was hit way too early last season when his yards before contact per attempt dropped from 3.8 to 2.5. Whether that improves, and whether this attack looks like the middling one of last season (116.9 yards per game) or the dominant one of 2024 (179.3) could be the key to how far Philly goes this year.

PASSING GAME

The Eagles have had a quarterback who is widely considered to be one of the best in the game (Hurts) and a 1-2 punch at receiver that is the envy of most teams (A.J. Brown, DeVonta Smith). They have a top-tier receiving tight end (Dallas Goedert) and a strong offensive line to give Hurts time to make it all go. So why does Philadelphia's passing attack always feel like such a struggle? That question is a big reason why offensive coordinator Kevin Patullo lost his job after last season, and the Eagles took a flier on the untested Mannion, a 33-year-old former Packers quarterbacks coach who was still playing just three years ago. Despite all that talent, the Eagles' passing attack ranked a dismal 23rd in the NFL last season, averaging just 194.3 yards

Saquon Barkley

by Frank Woodworth

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 28	at Chicago Bears	8:15 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	LOS ANGELES RAMS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	vs. Jacksonville (in London)	9:30 a.m.
6	Oct. 18	CAROLINA PANTHERS	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 26	DALLAS COWBOYS	8:15 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Washington Commanders	8:20 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	NEW YORK GIANTS	1:00 p.m.
10		BYE WEEK	
11	Nov. 22	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	4:25 p.m.
12	Nov. 26	at Dallas Cowboys	4:30 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Arizona Cardinals	4:05 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 19	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	5:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 24	HOUSTON TEXANS	8:15 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	at San Francisco 49ers	8:20 p.m.
18	TBD	at New York Giants	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Jalen Hurts	Tanner McKee
RB	Saquon Barkley	Tank Bigsby
WR	A.J. Brown	Dontayvion Wicks
WR	DeVonta Smith	Hollywood Brown
WR	Makai Lemon	Elijah Moore
TE	Dallas Goedert	Eli Stowers
LT	Jordan Mailata	Markel Bell
LG	Landon Dickerson	Micah Morris
C	Cam Jurgens	Drew Kendall
RG	Tyler Steen	-
RT	Lane Johnson	Fred Johnson

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Jalen Carter	Byron Young
NT	Jordan Davis	-
RDE	Moro Ojomo	Ty Robinson
WLB	Nolan Smith Jr.	Arnold Ebiketie
LILB	Zack Baun	Smael Mondon Jr.
RILB	Jihaad Campbell	Jeremiah Trotter Jr.
SLB	Jonathan Greenard	Jalyx Hunt
LCB	Riq Woolen	Jonathan Jones
SS	Marcus Epps	Cole Wisniewski
FS	Andrew Mukuba	J.T. Gray
RCB	Quinyon Mitchell	Kelee Ringo

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Jake Elliott	Braden Mann

Zack Baun

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	20	WR	Makai Lemon
2	54	TE	Eli Stowers
3	68	T	Markel Bell
6	178	QB	Cole Payton
6	207	G	Micah Morris

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	31	LB	Jihaad Campbell
2	64	S	Andrew Mukuba
4	111	DT	Ty Robinson
5	145	CB	Mac McWilliams
5	161	LB	Smael Mondon Jr.

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	22	CB	Quinyon Mitchell
2	40	CB	Cooper DeJean
3	94	EDGE	Jalyx Hunt
4	127	RB	Will Shipley
5	152	WR	Ainias Smith

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	9	DT	Jalen Carter
1	30	EDGE	Nolan Smith
3	65	OL	Tyler Steen
3	66	S	Sydney Brown
4	105	CB	Kelee Ringo

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	13	DT	Jordan Davis
2	51	C	Cam Jurgens
3	83	LB	Nakobe Dean
6	181	LB	Kyron Johnson
6	198	TE	Grant Calcaterra

per game. That's actually up 6 yards from the year before when the Eagles won the Super Bowl, though at least in that season they had the support of the No. 2 rushing attack in the league.

The larger point is that for two seasons now, the Eagles' passing attack has vastly underachieved. Brown and Smith are two legitimate, 1,000-yard receivers. Both would be No. 1 receivers on most other teams. And Goedert, when healthy, is as dangerous a passing weapon as any tight end in the NFL. But the passing game has always lacked consistency, cohesion and depth. They have not been nearly as good as they should be when throwing down the field, and they haven't been as creative as they could be on shorter throws, especially off play-action passes. They also are at times oddly predictable on off-schedule plays when Hurts escapes the pocket. He has tried to rein in his running in recent years, which has made his on-the-run passes easier to defend.

It also doesn't help that beyond the big three, there has been no one to take the pressure off. The Big Three accounted for 81 percent of Hurts' passing yards last season. That's why they took an offseason flier on Hollywood Brown. Their hope is that if he's healthy, the 29-year-old can add some much needed speed and elusiveness out of the slot. If he can draw some attention from opposing defenses, it should free everything up for Smith for bigger plays down the field. A.J. Brown was clearly frustrated by his lack of production the last two seasons—1,079 and 1,003 yards coming on the heels of back-to-back 1,400-yard seasons—and there were times he seemed to mentally check himself out of games. That's likely what prompted Philadelphia to acquire Dontayvion Wicks from the Packers for a 2026 fifth-round pick. Less than two weeks later, the Eagles traded up in the first round of April's draft to select USC wideout Makai Lemon with the 20th overall selection. It was widely reported a few days later that the Eagles would likely receive a first-round pick for A.J. Brown if the rumored Patriots trade came together on June 1. Second-round pick Eli Stowers is expected to be Philadelphia's No. 2 tight end behind Goedert.

Mannion has never called plays before. And Hurts' numbers the last two seasons—including his 3,224 yards, 64.8 completion percentage, 25 touchdowns and 6 interceptions last season—have dipped enough that he's no longer automatically considered to be elite. The talent is all there, though, which makes the Eagles a tantalizing team to watch. They know they can run the ball, even though they unexpectedly struggled in that department last season. Their Holy Grail is adding a dynamic passing attack to that. When that happens, as it did during their Super Bowl run two years ago, they are one of the most potent, multi-dimensional teams in the league. It's up to Mannion to find creative ways to unlock that, and to make Hurts the superstar he looked like he was going to be a couple of seasons ago.

RUN DEFENSE

The Eagles' run defense was a bit of a puzzle last season. At times they were dominant, especially up the middle where teams never found it easy to run on Jorden Davis or Jalen Carter. And if they did break through, linebackers Zach Baun and Jihaad Campbell were right there to pick up the slack. But the Eagles still gave up 124.4 rushing yards per game, which ranked a dismal 22nd in the league. And they had games like a miserable November loss in Chicago when they gave up 281 yards on the ground. They also had particular trouble with runs to the outside, which gave mobile quarterbacks a decided advantage against them.

It's hard to imagine things will be much different in 2026. They didn't add much this offseason to Vic Fangio's defense. Their strength is still up the middle with Carter and Davis, who just signed a three-year, $78 million extension, and behind them especially with Baun, a surprising Pro Bowler. But Fangio has never been a stack-the-box coordinator. He drops more into coverage because teams are passing more often, and he'd rather stop that. But the Eagles will need better run support from their corners, and better run defense on the edge from players like linebacker Nolan Smith or defensive end Moro Ojomo. If they don't get it, run-heavy teams and

mobile quarterbacks will continue to be a problem.

PASS DEFENSE

It took a half season for the Eagles' pass rush to get going last year, and in the end it was only average (42). It got better only after they traded for edge rusher Jaelen Phillips in November, who got plenty of pressure even though it only resulted in two sacks. But here's the problem: The Eagles didn't re-sign Phillips. Their best returning edge rusher is Jaylx Hunt, who only had 6.5 sacks. So the Eagles traded two third-round picks for Vikings Pro Bowl edge rusher Jonathan Greenard to essentially replace Phillips. Defensive tackle Jalen Carter had just three sacks while dealing with shoulder injuries and is expected to bounce back.

It's a good thing their secondary is so strong. Quinyon Mitchell, Cooper DeJean and newly acquired Riq Woolen is about as good a threesome as there is at that position in the league. Safety is a bit of a hole now that Reed Blankenship is gone, but the Eagles seem confident in Andrew Mukuba and Marcus Epps. It's the pass rush, though, that is their key, because there's only so much the best cover players can do if quarterbacks have too much time to pick them apart. Fangio's No. 1 concern has to be finding a pass rush. It's just not clear whether he has the players to get that done.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Eagles swear they haven't lost faith in veteran kicker Jake Elliott, but that's getting harder to believe. He's been on a sharp decline since 2023 when he converted 93.8 percent of his kicks. Over the last two years, he's nailed only 76.2 percent. And in an era where kickers are as reliable as ever from long distances, Elliott has been a nightmarish 5 of 15 from 50 yards and beyond. If he struggles again this season, it's hard to believe they'll be willing to keep their faith in him for long.

BOTTOM LINE

There isn't a team in the NFC East as talented as the Eagles, and they're probably more talented than all but a handful of teams in the league. They're also battle-tested with two Super Bowl runs over the last three years. But they know well that talent doesn't always win out. They were missing something last season—confidence, cohesion or maybe a coherent plan. They looked like a team searching for a direction, not sure of who they are. If Sirianni and his new OC can help them figure that out, they will be dangerous again. Even on auto-pilot they should be good for 11-12 wins. But they expect more than that. They expect a Super Bowl run. They have the talent to do that. It just might take a little more.

Jalyx Hunt

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Nick Sirianni
First season with Eagles: 2021
Regular-season record with Eagles: 59–26 (69.4%)
Offensive coordinator: Sean Mannion
Defensive coordinator: Vic Fangio
Special teams coordinator: Michael Clay

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Pass game coordinator: Josh Grizzard
Quarterbacks: Parks Frazier
Assistant head coach/running backs: Jemal Singleton
Wide receivers: Aaron Moorehead
Run game coordinator/tight ends: Ryan Mahaffey
Offensive line: Chris Kuper
Assistant offensive line: Greg Austin
Senior offensive assistant: Jerrod Johnson
Assistant quarterbacks: Montgomery VanGorder

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Clint Hurtt
Defensive ends/outside linebackers: Jeremiah Washburn
Inside linebackers: Bobby King
Assistant linebackers: Tyler Scudder
Defensive pass game coordinator: Joe Kasper
Secondary: Mike Pellegrino
Cornerbacks: Roy Anderson
Defensive assistant: Beyah Rasool / Allen Smith

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	11–7	61.1%	3–3	5–4	6–3
2024–25	18–3	85.7%	6–1	10–1	6–2
2023–24	11–7	61.1%	4–2	6–2	5–5
2022–23	16–4	80.0%	5–2	9–2	7–1
2021–22	9–9	50.0%	3–3	3–5	6–4
2020–21	4–11–1	26.7%	2–4	3–4–1	1–7
2019–20	9–8	52.9%	5–1	5–4	4–4
2018–19	10–8	55.6%	4–2	5–3	4–5
2017–18	16–3	84.2%	5–1	9–1	6–2
2016–17	7–9	43.8%	2–4	6–2	1–7
2015–16	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4
2014–15	10–6	62.5%	4–2	6–2	4–4
2013–14	10–7	58.8%	4–2	4–5	6–2
2012–13	4–12	25.0%	1–5	2–6	2–6
2011–12	8–8	50.0%	5–1	3–5	5–3
2010–11	10–7	58.8%	4–2	4–5	6–2
2009–10	11–6	64.7%	4–3	6–2	5–4
2008–09	11–7–1	61.1%	3–4	6–2	5–5–1
2007–08	8–8	50.0%	2–4	3–5	5–3
2006–07	11–7	61.1%	6–1	6–3	5–4

Washington Commanders

The Commanders learned a great lesson over the last few years of how quickly the tide can roll in and out in the NFL. Three years ago they were still bottom-feeders, reeling from the merciful end of the Daniel Snyder Era. Two years ago they were basking in the glow of a new owner, a new coach and a new franchise quarterback who carried them all to the NFC championship game. Everything was great! And then it wasn't. Their hero, Jayden Daniels, got hurt and played in only seven games last season, and he wasn't even particularly good when he was in the lineup. That only helped to expose all the rest of their many flaws, and before they knew it, the Commanders were 5-12 and bottom-feeders again.

So who are the real Commanders? The disasters of last season or the surprises of 2024? Getting a healthy Daniels will certainly go a long way towards returning them to prominence. Then again, they now have a really clear look at the holes they have to fill. The truth, as seemingly always, is probably somewhere in the middle. And it's probably up to Daniels to decide on which side of the middle ground they will fall.

Jacory Croskey-Merritt

RUNNING GAME

Here's the oddest thing about the Commanders' collapse last season: They were a dominant rushing team in 2024, when they averaged 154.1 rushing yards per game. And a ton of that had to do with Jayden Daniels, who led the team with 891 rushing yards. But when they lost him last season there wasn't much of a dip. They still ran for 134.7 yards per game—a drop of just 19.4, but still good enough to rank them fourth in the NFL. And remember, they lost running back Austin Ekeler for much of the season, too.

What they found, though, was a lot of production from the two-headed backfield of Jacory Croskey-Meritt (805 yards, 8 touchdowns) and Chris Rodriguez (500 yards, 6 touchdowns). And they got surprisingly strong play from their much-improved offensive line, after acquiring left tackle Laremy Tunsil in a trade with Houston. Their running backs averaged 1.4 yards before contact, which was the third-best number in the NFL.

The Commanders expect that their line will continue to improve, of course. They did let center Tyler Biadasz go in free agency, and he'll be replaced by Nick Allegretti, who'll slide over from guard. That's a risk, considering Allegretti has been a backup most of his career. But it's one the Commanders seem to be more than willing to take. Regardless, they believe it'll all work out, especially if Daniels is healthy. And if he's still capable of 800 or so rushing yards, they have the potential to be an electric ground force in 2026. Teams trying to stop a powerful running game and a truly dynamic quarterback won't know which way to turn.

And the Commanders could be better behind him, too. They certainly are deeper. They signed two veteran running backs—Rachaad White and Jerome Ford, who both were effective in part-time roles in recent seasons. White and Merritt figure to battle for the top spot in the backfield, but it really could end up being a matter of who gets hot. But there is no doubt that the rushing attack will be what the Commanders lean into, in part because it's their strength and in part because it's the simplest way to go. They let offensive coordinator Kliff Kingsbury go after the season and replaced him with David Blough, their assistant quarterbacks coach, who has exactly two years of NFL coaching experience. Given that, don't expect him to change much of what the Commanders have done well the last two years.

Jayden Daniels

PASSING GAME

Forget everything about the Commanders' passing attack last season, because it wasn't good. Marcus Mariota and Josh Johnson were serviceable backups at best. And to be honest, even Daniels was playing below his standards in the seven starts he was able to make. What the Commanders prefer to focus on is the Daniels they saw as a rookie in 2024—the dynamic weapon who dazzled with his legs, but was capable of magic with his right arm, too. That Daniels completed 69 percent of his passes for 3,568 yards, 25 touchdowns and nine interceptions. Then he was even better in the playoffs—822 yards, 5 touchdowns, 1 interception in three games—and they were convinced that was just the start. That's the Daniels they expect to see in 2026. That's the Daniels they need.

It will certainly help that Daniels is playing behind a much better offensive line than he was two years ago. In theory, he should be able to stay in the pocket more and only use his running ability as a strategy, not as a desperation play. If he can turn his scrambling into a well-timed weapon, he can really throw defenses off balance, because he's already proven he can make big throws while on the run. His receivers, though, are a big question mark. He still has the incredibly reliable and underrated Terry McLaurin, though he'll be 31 in September and missed seven games with a quad injury last season. Time may be catching up to the Commanders' No. 1 receiver. Beyond him, it's not really clear what the Commanders have now that they've chosen not to bring back Deebo Samuel. They didn't get much out of slot receivers Luke McCaffrey or Jaylin Lane last season. Treylon Burks only had 10 catches in eight games. They did sign Van Jefferson and brought back Dyami Brown, but both really should be competing for a third receiver role along with Antonio Williams, a third-round selection in April's draft who was a versatile receiver at Clemson.

The best addition they made to their passing game was signing tight end Chig Okonkowo, an underrated weapon who caught more than 50 passes in

by Frank Woodworth

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Philadelphia Eagles	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Dallas Cowboys	4:25 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	vs. Indianapolis Colts (in London)	9:30 a.m.
5	Oct. 11	NEW YORK GIANTS	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 19	at San Francisco 49ers	8:15 p.m.
7		BYE WEEK	
8	Nov. 1	PHILADELPHIA EAGLES	8:20 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	LOS ANGELES RAMS	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 12	at New York Giants	8:15 p.m.
11	Nov. 23	CINCINNATI BENGALS	8:15 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	at Arizona Cardinals	4:25 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Tennessee Titans	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	HOUSTON TEXANS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	ATLANTA FALCONS	1:00 p.m.
16	TBD	at Minnesota Vikings	TBD
17	TBD	at Jacksonville Jaguars	TBD
18	TBD	DALLAS COWBOYS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Jayden Daniels	Marcus Mariota
RB	Jacory Croskey-Merritt	Rachaad White
WR	Terry McLaurin	Treylon Burks
WR	Luke McCaffrey	Dyami Brown
WR	Antonio Williams	Van Jefferson
TE	Chig Okonkwo	John Bates
LT	Laremy Tunsil	Brandon Coleman
LG	Chris Paul	-
C	Nick Allegretti	Matt Gulbin
RG	Sam Cosmi	Andrew Wylie
RT	Josh Conerly Jr.	Trent Scott

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Tim Settle	Jer'Zhan Newton
NT	Daron Payne	Shy Tuttle
RDE	Javon Kinlaw	Ricky Barber
WLB	Odafe Oweh	Dorance Armstrong
LILB	Frankie Luvu	Jordan Magee
RILB	Sonny Styles	Leo Chenal
SLB	K'Lavon Chaisson	Joshua Josephs
LCB	Trey Amos	Tre Hawkins III
SS	Nick Cross	Will Harris
FS	Quan Martin	Jeremy Reaves
RCB	Mike Sainristil	Ahkello Witherspoon

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Jake Moody	Tress Way

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	7	LB	Sonny Styles
3	71	WR	Antonio Williams
5	147	DE	Joshua Josephs
6	187	RB	Kaytron Allen
6	209	C	Matt Gulbin

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	29	OT	Josh Conerly Jr.
2	61	CB	Trey Amos
4	128	WR	Jaylin Lane
6	205	LB	Kain Medrano
7	245	RB	Jacory Croskey-Merritt

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	2	QB	Jayden Daniels
2	36	DT	Jer'Zhan Newton
2	50	CB	Mike Sainristil
2	53	TE	Ben Sinnott
3	67	OL	Brandon Coleman

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	16	DB	Emmanuel Forbes
2	47	S	Jartavius Martin
3	97	C	Ricky Stromberg
4	118	G	Braeden Daniels
5	137	EDGE	KJ Henry

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	16	WR	Jahan Dotson
2	47	DT	Phidarian Mathis
3	98	RB	Brian Robinson Jr.
4	113	S	Percy Butler
5	144	QB	Sam Howell

Daron Payne

each of the last three years. But they got 50 catches out of the departed Zach Ertz last season, too, so Okonkowo is more of a replacement than an upgrade. In other words, the Commanders didn't exactly do much to help out Daniels. They are counting on McLaurin returning to his old form and that their quantity of other receivers will make up for the lack of quality. Mostly what they're counting on is that Daniels will be the budding superstar he was and will magically make everyone around him better.

Don't rule out that happening either, because it's what Daniels did in 2024 when he made a symphony out of McLaurin, Ertz, McCaffrey, Dyami Brown, Noah Brown and Olamide Zaccheaus. That's not exactly a Broadway lineup of performers, but Daniels found a way to make them sing. He can do that again—at least enough to be a complement to what they hope is a powerful run game. It's clear the Commanders don't want to lean into their passing attack to carry them. If they did, they would've done more in the offseason to help themselves out.

RUN DEFENSE

Dan Quinn was a celebrated defensive coordinator before he was hired by the Commanders. He was considered to be one of the best and brightest defensive minds in the game. So why has his defense been so bad during his two years in Washington, particularly against the run? The Commanders, in fact, have ranked 30th against the run in both of his first two seasons. And they've made a slew of personnel changes in each of those seasons, and nothing seems to have worked. They should be better with Daron Payne and Javon Kinlaw anchoring their defense in the middle of the defensive line. They were even strong at linebacker with Frankie Luvu and the since departed Bobby Wagner. But nothing worked.

That's why Quinn took over the defense last season (to no avail) and eventually fired defensive coordinator Joe Whitt Jr. and replaced him with Vikings passing game coordinator Daronte Jones. But again, most of the key personnel is the same, with the notable exception of Wagner being replaced at middle linebacker by Sonny Styles, the seventh overall selection in April's draft. Washington signed Leo Chenal, who played almost exclusively outside in his four seasons in Kansas City. The other additions were more about the pass rush. If the Commanders are going to finally have even an adequate run defense, it's really going to be all about the scheme.

PASS DEFENSE

Four of the Commanders' top five pass rushers from last season, based on sack numbers, are not back with the team. The only one returning is defensive tackle Jer'Zhan Newton, who was fourth on the team with five sacks last season, despite only starting two games. That's why they went out and added Odafe Oweh and K'Lavon Chiasson on their edges in the offseason—two players who each had 7.5 sacks last season, which would've tied them both for second on Washington last year. With those two, the pass rush may not be fierce, but it should definitely be much improved from the middling 42 sacks they had as a team last season.

That will help. But what should help even more are the upgrades in their secondary. They signed cornerback Amik Robertson and safety Nick Cross, both good veteran upgrades over the players they replaced. They will be excellent

Mike Sainristil

additions to a group led by promising cornerback Mike Sainristil, who led the Commanders with four interceptions last year. Overall, it's a good, but not great secondary, personnel-wise, but it has a big upside if the pass rush is what the Commanders expect it to be. That's really the most important part for them. Just like the play of the defensive tackles is key to their run defense, the play of their edge rushers is the key to their passing defense. And while no teams are game planning in fear about facing Chiasson, Oweh or even Luvu, the three of them together could be a lot for opposing offensive coordinators to handle.

SPECIAL TEAMS

They love Pro Bowl punter Tress Way, who is now heading into his 13th season down in Washington with no sign of slowing down. He is one of the best in the business, with a strong net average (43.9 last year), remarkable consistency, and a knack for pinning teams inside their own 20. At times last year, the punt unit was the best thing about this team. Kicking has been more of an adventure, but they stabilized the situation when they signed Jake Moody last November. He made 10 of his 11 field goals in six games with the Commanders, including 2 of 2 from 50 yards. That was good enough to earn him the job for the start of this year.

BOTTOM LINE

The return of Jayden Daniels is everything to the Commanders. If he's back, and plays like he did two years ago, they're a playoff contender again. But they are still so flawed there might be a limit to how far even he can carry them. They lack weapons in the passing game, which could be a problem. And while they've improved the talent on defense, it still doesn't look very good overall. But Daniels is special. As he proved in 2024, he's capable of a magical run that exceeds all expectations. Just don't count on it because doing that might be harder this season than it was two years ago.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Dan Quinn
First season with Commanders: 2024
Regular-season record with Commanders: 17–17 (50.5%)
Offensive coordinator: David Blough
Defensive coordinator: Daronte Jones
Special teams coordinator: Larry Izzo

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Offensive pass game coordinator: David Raih
Quarterbacks: D.J. Williams
Assistant quarterbacks: Danny Etling
Running backs: Anthony Lynn
Assistant running backs: Jesse Madden
Wide receivers: Bobby Engram
Assistant wide receivers/returners: Andre Coleman
Tight ends: Ben Steele
Offensive line: Darnell Stapleton

DEFENSE

Defensive line/run game coordinator: Eric Henderson
Assistant defensive line: Darryl Tapp
Linebackers: Ken Norton Jr.
Outside linebackers: John Pagano
Assistant linebackers: George Banko
Defensive backs/cornerbacks: William Gay
Defensive backs/safeties: Tommy Donatell
Defensive quality control: Luke Johnson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	5–12	29.4%	3–3	2–6	3–5
2024–25	14–6	70.0%	4–3	7–2	7–4
2023–24	4–13	23.5%	0–6	1–7	3–6
2022–23	8–8–1	50.0%	2–3–1	4–5	4–3–1
2021–22	7–10	41.2%	2–4	3–5	4–5
2020–21	7–10	41.2%	4–2	3–6	3–4
2019–20	3–13	18.8%	0–6	1–7	2–6
2018–19	7–9	43.8%	2–4	3–5	4–4
2017–18	7–9	43.8%	1–5	5–3	2–6
2016–17	8–7–1	53.3%	3–3	4–4	4–3
2015–16	9–8	52.9%	4–2	6–3	3–5
2014–15	4–12	25.0%	2–4	3–5	1–7
2013–14	3–13	18.8%	0–6	2–6	1–7
2012–13	10–7	58.8%	5–1	5–4	5–3
2011–12	5–11	31.3%	2–4	2–6	3–5
2010–11	6–10	37.5%	2–4	2–6	4–4
2009–10	4–12	25.0%	0–6	3–5	1–7
2008–09	8–8	50.0%	3–3	4–4	4–4
2007–08	9–8	52.9%	3–3	5–3	4–5
2006–07	5–11	31.3%	1–5	3–5	2–6

D'Andre Swift

Chicago Bears

The Chicago Bears finished 11-6, won the NFC North and advanced to the divisional playoffs under first-year coach Ben Johnson. The Bears had seven comeback victories in 2025, including two unforgettable franchise-lifting rallies against the rival Green Bay Packers at Soldier Field. Chicago beat Green Bay 22-16 in Week 16 on a 46-yard walk-off touchdown pass from Caleb Williams to DJ Moore in overtime. The teams met again in the NFC Wild Card round, and the Bears rallied from a 21-3 half-time deficit to shock the Packers 31-27. Chicago's luck ran out in the 20-17 overtime loss against the Rams the following week, but Johnson made a loud statement in Year 1.

The Bears will be among the top contenders in the NFC in 2026. Williams enters Year 3 with a strong returning supporting cast on offense. Offensive coordinator Declan Doyle departed for the Baltimore Ravens, and Johnson elevated passing game coordinator Press Taylor to the position. Dennis Allen returns at defensive coordinator. Chicago has top-down continuity under general manager Ryan Poles, and Johnson has brought the long-lost competitive arrogance back to the franchise not seen since the Mike Ditka heyday in the 1980s. How will the Bears deal with the increased expectations in Johnson's second season in the NFC North?

RUNNING GAME

The running game under Johnson is underappreciated. Chicago ranked third in the NFL in rushing yards per game (144.5 yards per game) and was one of five teams with at least 500 rushing attempts. The Lions had 500-plus rushing attempts the previous two seasons with Johnson as the offensive coordinator.

The Bears had 281 rushing yards in a 24-15 victory against Philadelphia in Week 13, which was the running scheme at its finest.

D'Andre Swift finished with 1,087 rushing yards and nine TDs in his second season with Chicago. According to Pro Football Focus, Swift ranked seventh in the NFL with 32 runs of 10 yards or more. He returns for the final year of a three-year contract. Kyle Monangai, a seventh-round pick in the 2025 NFL Draft, was a breakout player as a rookie. He had 783 yards and five TDs on 4.6 yards per carry and could push for an even time-share. Williams also is a threat to run. He averages 5.6 yards per carry and 438.5 rushing yards per season. That keeps lanes open for the running backs. Roschon Johnson, the third back, has one year remaining on his contract

Caleb Williams

by Bill Bender

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Carolina Panthers	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	MINNESOTA VIKINGS	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 28	PHILADELPHIA EAGLES	8:15 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	NEW YORK JETS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Green Bay Packers	4:25 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Atlanta Falcons	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 22	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	8:15 p.m.
8	Nov. 2	at Seattle Seahawks	8:15 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	8:20 p.m.
10		BYE WEEK	
11	Nov. 22	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 26	at Detroit Lions	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Miami Dolphins	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 19	at Buffalo Bills	8:20 p.m.
16	Dec. 25	GREEN BAY PACKERS	1:00 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	DETROIT LIONS	4:25 p.m.
18	TBD	at Minnesota Vikings	TBD

and will have to fight to keep a roster spot.

The offense line had a shakeup when Pro Bowl center Drew Dalman announced his retirement on March 3. Dalman, 27, played just five seasons and had two years remaining on his contract. The Bears traded a 2027 first-round pick for New England center Garrett Bradbury, who started in 17 games for the Patriots last season and played in Minnesota from 2019-24. Chicago used a second-round draft pick on Logan Jones, an Iowa center who won the Rimington Trophy last season.

Left tackle Ozzy Trapilo suffered a ruptured patellar tendon in the NFC Wild Card matchup against Green Bay, so that is a major question mark, at least to start the season. Jedrick Wills, a 2020 first-round pick in Cleveland, will get an opportunity to fill that spot. Left guard Joe Thuney and right guard Jonah Jackson each made 17 starts last season. Darnell Wright, a 2023 first-round pick, has settled into the right tackle position.

PASSING GAME

The Bears ranked 10th in the NFL with 225.1 passing yards per game. Williams finished 3,942 passing yards, just missing on the chance to become the first Chicago quarterback to hit 4,000 yards in a single season. He will be in the mix to accomplish that feat in 2026 in Year 2 with Johnson. Williams is an ad-lib playmaker, which he showed with the game-tying TD pass to Cole Kmet against the Rams in the NFC divisional playoffs. Williams made improvements in the play-action passing game in Year 2, and his ability to extend plays stands out.

Williams had a 90.1 passer rating, which ranked 22nd among NFL QBs, and was behind Detroit's Jared Goff (105.5) and Green Bay's Jordan Love (101.2) in the NFC North. Williams is 3-2 against the Packers (including playoffs), but he's also 0-4 against the Lions. He will have to prove it all over again in a tight division race in 2026. Williams has 47 TDs and 13 interceptions in two seasons, and the key to his success last season was a dramatic drop in sacks. He took 68 sacks as a rookie in 2025. He finished with 24 last season.

Williams still needs to be more accurate—a 58.1% completion percentage ranked 34th in the NFL last season. Yet Williams' charisma and confidence is undeniable, and that shined through in the two victories against Green Bay. He had a 94.3 passer rating in the

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Caleb Williams	Tyson Bagent
RB	D'Andre Swift	Kyle Monangai
WR	Rome Odunze	Jahdae Walker
WR	Luther Burden III	Kalif Raymond
WR	Zavion Thomas	Maurice Alexander
TE	Colston Loveland	Cole Kmet
LT	Braxton Jones	Ozzy Trapilo
LG	Joe Thuney	Jordan McFadden
C	Garrett Bradbury	Logan Jones
RG	Jonah Jackson	Luke Newman
RT	Darnell Wright	-

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Montez Sweat	Jeremiah Martin
LDT	Grady Jarrett	Neville Gallimore
RDT	Gervon Dexter Sr.	Shemar Turner
RDE	Dayo Odeyingbo	Austin Booker
WLB	Devin Bush	Ruben Hyppolite II
MLB	T.J. Edwards	Noah Sewell
SLB	D'Marco Jackson	Jack Sanborn
LCB	Jaylon Johnson	Jaylon Jones
SS	Dillon Thieneman	Cam Lewis
FS	Coby Bryant	Gervarrius Owens
RCB	Tyrique Stevenson	Malik Muhammad

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Cairo Santos	Tory Taylor

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	25	S	Dillon Thieneman
2	57	C	Logan Jones
3	69	TE	Sam Roush
3	89	WR	Zavion Thomas
4	124	CB	Malik Muhammad

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	10	TE	Colston Loveland
2	39	WR	Luther Burden III
2	56	OT	Ozzy Trapilo
2	62	DT	Shemar Turner
4	132	LB	Ruben Hyppolite II

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	1	QB	Caleb Williams
1	9	WR	Rome Odunze
3	75	OT	Kiran Amegadjie
4	122	P	Tory Taylor
5	144	EDGE	Austin Booker

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	10	OT	Darnell Wright
2	53	DT	Gervon Dexter
2	56	CB	Tyrique Stevenson
3	64	DT	Zacch Pickens
4	115	RB	Roschon Johnson

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	39	CB	Kyler Gordon
2	48	S	Jaquan Brisker
3	71	WR	Velus Jones Jr.
5	168	OT	Braxton Jones
5	174	DE	Dominique Robinson

Montez Sweat

fourth quarter in 2026. Williams has two years left on his contract, including a fifth-year option, and it appears Chicago finally has a franchise quarterback.

The Bears traded veteran receiver DJ Moore and a 2026 fifth-round pick to the Buffalo Bills for a 2026 second-round pick. Moore's production declined in each of his three seasons with the Bears, and that creates more opportunities for Rome Odunze and Luther Burden III. Who will step up as the leading receiver in Chicago? That is an open-ended question heading into training camp. Odunze, a 2024 first-round pick, needs to establish a more efficient connection for Williams. Odunze missed five games last season because of a foot injury. He has 98 catches on 191 targets the last two seasons, a 51.3% catch percentage. He did have six receiving TDs last season, including three scores in the red zone.

Burden, a second-round steal in the 2025 NFL Draft, emerged in the back-half of the season for the Bears. Burden is an excellent route runner. He had 21 catches on 26 targets for 324 yards—an average of 15.4 yards per catch—in Chicago's last four games. The Bears also signed Kalif Raymond, a nine-year veteran who spent the last five seasons in Detroit. Wide receiver isn't a need, but the Bears still added another target with LSU receiver Zavion Thomas in the third round of April's draft.

Tight end Colston Loveland, a 2025 first-round pick from Michigan, was another breakout performer in the offense. Loveland had 58 receptions on 82 targets. He finished with 713 receiving yards and six TDs. Williams leaned heavily on Loveland late in the season. He had 10 or more targets in the final two regular-season games and both playoff games. Expect Loveland to develop into a Pro Bowl player in Year 2. Kmet, who had 30 catches for 347 yards and two TDs, also returns.

RUN DEFENSE

The Bears ranked 27th in run defense last season at 134.5 rushing yards per game, and that included six games with 175 or more yards rushing. Chicago was one of five teams that allowed five yards per carry or more. That will have to improve in 2026 if the Bears want to entertain another deep playoff run. Montez Sweat remains the most-disruptive player on the defensive line, but he is the primary pass rusher.

The Bears signed veteran linebacker Devin Bush to a three-year, $30 million contract this offseason. Bush had a career-high 125 tackles and three interceptions and seven tackles for loss in Cleveland. He is an excellent sideline-to-sideline linebacker who should help improve the run defense. T.J. Edwards suffered a fractured fibula in the playoff victory against Green Bay. Tremaine Edmunds, who had 100-plus tackles each of the last three seasons, signed with the Giants via free agency.

The rest of the defensive front has experience. Gervon Dexter, a 326-pound defensive tackle, and Grady Jarrett, who enters his 12th season, are the interior lineman. Dayo Odeyingbo is the other defensive end.

PASS DEFENSE

Sweat led Chicago with 10 sacks in his second full season with the franchise. It marked the second time he hit double-digit sacks, and that came with 18 quarterback hits. Sweat still has two years left on his contract. Dexter added six sacks. Austin Booker had 4.5 sacks and 12 quarterback hurries in his second season and could see more pass-rush opportunities in Year 3.

The Bears led the NFL with 33 forced turnovers and a plus-22 turnover margin. That included 23 interceptions from a secondary that frequently uses five defensive backs. Chicago allowed 300-plus passing yards in just four games (including postseason), and two of those games were against the Lions.

Both safeties are gone. Kevin Byard, who had seven interceptions, signed with New England. Jaquan Brisker left for Pittsburgh. Chicago added Seattle safety Coby Bryant, who had four interceptions, on a three-year contract. Buffalo safety Cam Lewis signed a two-year deal. Byard and Brisker both started in all 17 games in 2025. The Bears also selected Oregon safety Dillon

Thieneman with the No. 25 pick in the first round—he will clearly be in the mix.

Cornerback Tyrique Stevenson and Jaylon Johnson had one interception apiece last season, and nickel back Kyler Gordon was on injured reserve twice. Will he stay healthy? Chicago added depth with Malik Muhammad, a fourth-round cornerback from Texas, but it will be difficult to match the interception total from last season.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Cairo Santos connected on 25 of 30 field goal attempts, including 10 of 12 from 40-to-49 yards and 4 of 6 from 50 yards or more. It marked his least accurate season with the Bears, but he still has a 87.3% field-goal percentage at Soldier Field the last six seasons.

Tory Taylor ranked 11th in the NFL with 47.8 yards per punt. The 2024 fourth-round pick remained consistent the last two seasons, but his net punt average slipped to 40.4 in 2025. Raymond can handle kickoff and punt return duties. He led the NFL in punt return yards in 2024 and punt return attempts last season. Raymond has one return TD in each of the last two years. He adds an exciting playmaker on special teams.

BOTTOM LINE

Johnson has brought swagger back to Chicago, and the NFC North rivalries, especially with the Packers and Lions, will continue to intensify.

Williams should crack that 4,000-yard mark and continue to develop into a superstar quarterback. The Bears face opponents from the AFC East and NFC South, and a first-place schedule means matchups with the Eagles and Seahawks. It will be a little tougher this time around, but expect Chicago to compete for another NFC North title and be a factor in the NFC playoff race to the Super Bowl.

Tyrique Stevenson

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Ben Johnson
First season with Bears: 2025
Regular-season record with Bears: 11–6 (64.7%)
Offensive coordinator: Press Taylor
Defensive coordinator: Dennis Allen
Special teams coordinator: Richard Hightower

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

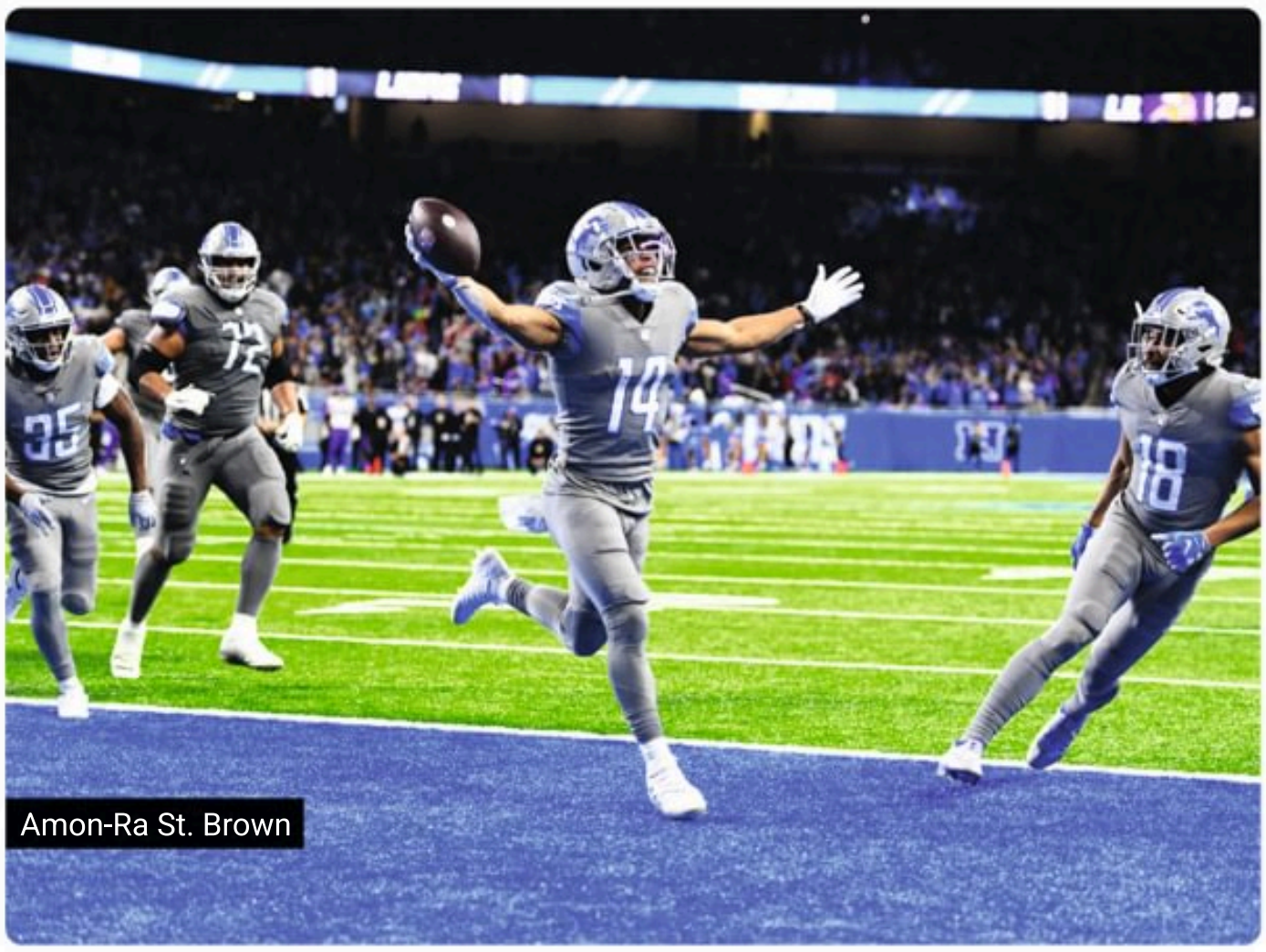
Offensive coordinator: Press Taylor
Quarterbacks: JT Barrett
Running backs: Eric Studesville
Wide receivers: Antwaan Randle El
Tight ends: Jim Dray
Offensive line: Dan Roushar
Assistant offensive line: Kyle DeVan
Offensive analyst: Will Lawing
Assistant quarterbacks / receivers: Robbie Picazo

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Jeremy Garrett
Linebackers: Richard Smith
Assistant linebackers: Kevin Koch
Defensive backs/passing game coordinator: Al Harris
Assistant defensive backs/safeties: Matt Giordano
Senior defensive assistant: Bill Johnson
Defensive assistant/nickels: Cannon Matthews
Defensive quality control: Kenny Norton III

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	12–7	63.2%	3–4	7–3	5–4
2024–25	5–12	29.4%	1–5	3–5	1–7
2023–24	7–10	41.2%	2–4	5–3	2–7
2022–23	3–14	17.7%	0–6	2–7	1–7
2021–22	6–11	35.3%	2–4	3–5	3–6
2020–21	8–9	47.1%	2–4	3–5	5–4
2019–20	8–8	50.0%	4–2	4–4	4–3
2018–19	12–5	70.6%	5–1	7–2	5–3
2017–18	5–11	31.3%	0–6	3–5	2–6
2016–17	3–13	18.8%	2–4	3–5	0–8
2015–16	6–10	37.5%	1–5	1–7	5–3
2014–15	5–11	31.3%	1–5	2–6	3–5
2013–14	8–8	50.0%	2–4	5–3	3–5
2012–13	10–6	62.5%	3–3	5–3	5–3
2011–12	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–5
2010–11	12–6	66.7%	5–2	6–4	5–2
2009–10	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2008–09	9–7	56.3%	4–2	6–2	3–5
2007–08	7–9	43.8%	2–4	4–4	3–5
2006–07	15–4	79.0%	5–1	8–2	7–1


Amon-Ra St. Brown

Detroit Lions

The Detroit Lions created a winning culture with coach Dan Campbell. How will Detroit maintain that in a much-tougher NFC North in 2026? One year after going 15-2 and earning the top seed in the NFC, the Lions finished just 9-8 and missed the playoffs. Campbell lost both coordinators before the 2025 season. Offensive coordinator Ben Johnson took the head-coaching position with the Chicago Bears, and defensive coordinator Aaron Glenn became the head coach for the New York Jets.

Campbell took over play-calling duties for offensive coordinator John Morton in Week 9 after a rocky start, and Detroit ended up finishing fourth in the NFL in points per game at 28.3. Morton was replaced by Drew Petzing, who spent the last three seasons as the offensive coordinator for the Cardinals. Kelvin Sheppard returns at defensive coordinator, and he is a candidate to be a head coach soon.

General manager Brad Holmes and Campbell changed the culture with an aggressive approach in the draft and on the field. First-round picks Penei Sewell (2021), Aidan Hutchinson (2022), Jahmyr Gibbs (2023) and Jack Campbell (2023) have been core players in that turnaround. Campbell's aggressive play-calling approach is part of that identity, too. The Lions have converted 81 of 141 fourth-down attempts the last four years for a 57.4% conversion rate. The Lions have recorded four straight winning seasons for the first time since 1969-72 and will try to make it five straight for the first time since 1934-39. Detroit returns a talented roster that includes six Pro Bowl players from 2025.

RUNNING GAME

The Lions branded their backfield "Sonic and Knuckles" with the combination of Gibbs and David Montgomery the last three seasons. Detroit ranked 14th in the NFL with 120.1 rushing yards per game. The Lions also averaged 4.6 yards per attempt and piled up 77 rushing TDs in that stretch. Montgomery signed a two-year deal with Houston, and Detroit added Kansas City running back Isiah Pacheco on a one-year contract. "Sonic and Taz" does not have the same ring to it, but the combination will be productive.

Gibbs ranked fifth in the NFL with 1,839 yards from scrimmage in 2025. He had 1,223 yards on five yards per carry, and 77 receptions. He's a multi-purpose star and the centerpiece of the Lions' offense. He averages 13 rushing TDs per season the last three years. Pacheco is a physical back whose production tailed off in Kansas City the last two years. He suffered a broken right fibula in 2024 and dealt with a MCL sprain last season. Pacheco is a bounce-back candidate in this offense, however.

Will Detroit have the same success running the football? The Lions were 0-7 last season when they failed to rush for at least 100 yards. Detroit also had three games—two after Campbell took over as the play-caller—with more than 200 rushing yards. Campbell likes running the football, but the offensive line will have a few changes in 2026. Left tackle Penei Sewell anchors the offensive line. He is a three-time NFL All-Pro selection, and one of the most reliable offensive linemen in the NFL. Left guard Christian Mahogany made 11 starts last season, and right guard Tate Ratledge started all 17 games as a rookie.

The Lions have questions at center and right tackle. Center Graham Glasgow is a free agent, and veteran Frank Ragnow briefly tried to come out of retirement last season. Detroit released right tackle Taylor Decker after 10 seasons. The Lions signed Carolina center Cade Mays and Miami right tackle Larry Borom via free agency. The Lions also selected Clemson's Blake Miller, who played both right and left tackle in college,

in the first round of the 2026 NFL Draft.

PASSING GAME

The Lions hired Mike Kafka as the new passing coordinator. Kafka was the offensive coordinator for the Giants—he served as interim coach for seven games last season. Kafka also was an assistant coach in Kansas City from 2017-21. Detroit ranked in the top three in the NFL in passing offense each of the last three years. The Lions ranked third last season with 253.1 yards per game, which was behind the Rams (268.1) and Cowboys (266.3). It's a methodical approach with veteran quarterback Jared Goff, a former No. 1 pick in the 2016 NFL Draft with the Rams.

Goff is coming off a fourth straight 4,000-yard season. He passed for 4,564 yards, 34 TDs and eight interceptions in 2025. Goff had a 105.5 passer rating, which ranked behind New England's Drake Maye (113.5) and Los Angeles' Matthew Stafford (109.2). Stafford and Maye were the top two vote-getters in the NFL MVP race. Goff had six games with 300-plus passing yards, and the Lions were 4-2 in those games. Goff turns 32 in October and has three years left on a $212 million contract. Goff has started in all 17 games each of the last four years, but he did take a career-high 38 sacks in 2025. Teddy Bridgewater, an 11-year veteran, signed with the Lions on March 23 and is the backup.

Goff is on his third different offensive coordinator in three seasons with Petzing. That relationship will be scrutinized early in the season, but Detroit returns most of its pass-catching production from 2025. Amon-Ra St. Brown ranked fifth in the NFL with 117 catches and 1,401 receiving yards and tied for second in the league with 11 TDs. St. Brown had a 68% catch percentage and remains the go-to target for Goff. St. Brown also has three years left on his contract and should continue to

Jahmyr Gibbs

by Bill Bender

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 17	at Buffalo Bills	8:15 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	NEW YORK JETS	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Carolina Panthers	8:20 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Arizona Cardinals	4:25 p.m.
6		BYE WEEK	
7	Oct. 25	GREEN BAY PACKERS	4:25 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	MINNESOTA VIKINGS	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at Miami Dolphins	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	vs. New England (in Munich)	9:30 a.m.
11	Nov. 22	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 26	CHICAGO BEARS	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Atlanta Falcons	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	TENNESSEE TITANS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Minnesota Vikings	8:20 p.m.
16	Dec. 28	NEW YORK GIANTS	8:15 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	at Chicago Bears	4:25 p.m.
18	TBD	at Green Bay Packers	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Jared Goff	Teddy Bridgewater
RB	Jahmyr Gibbs	Isiah Pacheco
WR	Amon-Ra St. Brown	Greg Dortch
WR	Jameson Williams	Dominic Lovett
WR	Isaac TeSlaa	Kendrick Law
TE	Sam LaPorta	Brock Wright
LT	Penei Sewell	Larry Borom
LG	Christian Mahogany	Ben Bartch
C	Cade Mays	Michael Niese
RG	Tate Ratledge	Miles Frazier
RT	Blake Miller	Giovanni Manu

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Aidan Hutchinson	Tyler Lacy
LDT	Alim McNeill	Tyleik Williams
RDT	Levi Onwuzurike	Chris Smith
RDE	DJ Wonnum	Derrick Moore
WLB	Derrick Barnes	Damone Clark
MLB	Jack Campbell	Erick Hunter
SLB	Malcolm Rodriguez	Jimmy Rolder
LCB	D.J. Reed	Rock Ya-Sin
SS	Brian Branch	Avonte Maddox
FS	Kerby Joseph	Chuck Clark
RCB	Terrion Arnold	Keith Abney II

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Jake Bates	Jack Fox

Tyleik Williams

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	17	T	Blake Miller
2	44	DE	Derrick Moore
4	118	LB	Jimmy Rolder
5	157	CB	Keith Abney II
5	168	WR	Kendrick Law

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	28	DT	Tyleik Williams
2	57	G	Tate Ratledge
3	70	WR	Isaac TeSlaa
5	171	G	Miles Frazier
6	196	DE	Ahmed Hassanein

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	24	CB	Terrion Arnold
2	61	CB	Ennis Rakestraw
4	126	OT	Giovanni Manu
4	132	RB	Sione Vaki
6	189	DT	Mekhi Wingo

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	12	RB	Jahmyr Gibbs
1	18	LB	Jack Campbell
2	34	TE	Sam LaPorta
2	45	S	Brian Branch
3	68	QB	Hendon Hooker

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	2	DE	Aidan Hutchinson
1	12	WR	Jameson Williams
2	46	DE	Josh Paschal
3	97	S	Kerby Joseph
5	177	TE	James Mitchell

be one of the elite playmakers for the foreseeable future.

Jameson Williams, a first-round pick in 2022, is coming off back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons. He has seven TDs each of the last two seasons and is the primary vertical threat with an average of 17.0 yards per catch through four seasons. St. Brown and Williams were one of three receiving tandems that had 1,000-yard seasons in 2025. Philadelphia's DeVonta Smith (1,008) and A.J. Brown (1,003) were the other receivers, and Arizona tight end Trey McBride (1,239) and Michael Wilson (1,006) were the other receiving duo to hit that mark.

Petzing worked with McBride in Arizona, and that is good news for Detroit tight end Sam LaPorta, who was limited to nine games because of a back injury last season. LaPorta had 40 catches for 489 yards and three TDs but should return to his role as a high-volume target for the Lions. Detroit also signed Greg Dortch, a reliable possession receiver in Arizona the last five seasons. Kalif Raymond signed with Chicago via free agency. Isaac TeSlaa should see an increased role as the third receiver. TeSlaa, a 6-foot-4 receiver who was a second-round pick in the 2025 NFL Draft, emerged as a fan favorite. He had six TD receptions, and five of those scores were in the red zone.

RUN DEFENSE

The Lions ranked 14th in run defense last season at 114.5 yards per game. Sheppard prefers a 4-3 scheme, and that's built around linebacker Campbell in the middle. Campbell finished second in the NFL with 176 tackles. He's one of the premier players at the position, and he finished with nine tackles for loss. Malcolm Rodriguez re-signed and could step into a starting role, and Derrick Barnes totaled 78 tackles and six tackles for loss in 2025. Linebacker Alex Anzalone signed with the Buccaneers.

Defensive tackle Alim McNeill played in 10 games last season after suffering a torn ACL in 2024, and he pairs well with Tyliek Williams, a 2025 first-round pick from Ohio State who made 10 starts as a rookie. Detroit allowed 150 or more rushing yards in a three-game losing streak to the Rams, Steelers and Vikings that knocked the team out of playoff contention last season.

PASS DEFENSE

Hutchinson returned from a gruesome leg injury suffered in the 2024 season and worked back into his role as an elite pass-rusher. Hutchinson had 14.5 sacks and 35 quarterback hits, and that included a four-game run with six sacks in the last four games. He should be among the NFL leaders in sacks this season. Al-Quadin Muhammad, who signed with Tampa Bay, had 11 sacks opposite Hutchinson. The Lions are hoping Carolina defensive end DJ Wonnum, who averages five sacks per season, can help replace that production. Wonnum is on a one-year, $3 million contract. Campbell and Barnes combined for nine sacks last season and can bring pressure from the linebacker position. Detroit also added Derrick Moore, a second-round pick from Michigan who had 10 sacks last season.

The Lions ranked 20th in the NFL with a pass defense that allowed 217.4 yards per game. Detroit allowed 31 TD passes,

which was tied for 27th in the NFL. That needs to improve. Terrion Arnold averages nine pass breakups in his first two seasons, and D.J. Reed had two interceptions in his first season with the Lions. Roger McCreary, a free-agent pickup from the Rams, is the favorite to start as the fifth defensive back.

Strong safety Brian Branch suffered a ruptured Achilles tendon in Week 14 and likely will be on the PUP list to start 2026. He finished with 75 tackles, five tackles for loss and five quarterback hits. Kerby Joseph led the Lions with three interceptions, and he dealt with a knee injury at the end of last season. Christian Izien, a free-agent pickup from Tampa Bay, and Chuck Clark, a free-agent pickup from Pittsburgh, are options until Branch and Joseph return.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Jack Fox averaged 46.6 yards per punt, and finished tied for seventh in the NFL with 28 touchbacks. He's a reliable punter, and Campbell has a reputation for mixing in fake punts. The Lions are an impressive 9 of 13 (69.2%) on fake-punt attempts under Campbell with special teams coordinator Dave Fipp, but their lone try last season against Philadelphia in Week 11 was unsuccessful.

Jake Bates led the NFL in extra points for the second straight season, but he had a 79.4% field-goal percentage and was just 13 of 20 on field-goal attempts of 40 yards or more. He will have to be more accurate this season. Raymond led the NFL with 32 punt returns in 2025, but Tom Kennedy should be suited to handle kickoff and punt return duties this season.

BOTTOM LINE

This is a pivotal year in terms of which direction the Campbell era goes. The Lions swept the Bears last season, including a 52-21 victory in Week 2, but they were swept by the Packers and Vikings. The Lions also had a 5-4 record at home, their worst home record since 2022. Detroit will play in the Munich Game in 2026 with a schedule that includes the NFC South and AFC East, including a trip to Buffalo. Expect the Lions to be in contention for the NFC North with the Bears and Packers, and those games will determine whether the Lions have a bounce-back season in 2026.

Jack Fox

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Dan Campbell
First season with Lions: 2021
Regular-season record with Lions: 48–36–1 (57.1%)
Offensive coordinator: Drew Petzing
Defensive coordinator: Kelvin Sheppard
Special teams coordinator: Dave Fipp

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Passing game coordinator: Mike Kafka
Quarterbacks: Mark Brunell
Running backs: Tashard Choice
Wide receivers: Scottie Montgomery
Assistant wide receivers: Bruce Gradkowski
Tight ends: Steve Oliver
Run game coordinator/offensive line: Hank Fraley
Pass game specialist: David Shaw
Offensive quality control: Justin Mesa

DEFENSE

Run game coordinator/defensive line: Kacy Rodgers
Linebackers: Shaun Dion Hamilton
Pass game coordinator/defensive backs: Deshea Townsend
Outside linebackers: David Corrao
Safeties: Jim O'Neil
Defensive assistant: Caleb Collins
Defensive assistant: August Mangin
Defensive quality control: Dré Thompson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	9–8	52.9%	2–4	5–3	4–5
2024–25	15–3	83.3%	6–0	7–3	8–0
2023–24	14–6	70.0%	4–2	8–2	6–4
2022–23	9–8	52.9%	5–1	5–4	4–4
2021–22	3–13–1	18.8%	2–4	3–5	0–8–1
2020–21	5–11	31.3%	1–5	1–7	4–4
2019–20	3–12–1	20.0%	0–6	2–6	1–6–1
2018–19	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2017–18	9–7	56.3%	5–1	4–4	5–3
2016–17	9–8	52.9%	3–3	6–2	3–6
2015–16	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–4
2014–15	11–6	64.7%	5–1	7–1	3–5
2013–14	7–9	43.8%	4–2	4–4	3–5
2012–13	4–12	25.0%	0–6	2–6	2–6
2011–12	10–7	58.8%	3–3	5–3	5–4
2010–11	6–10	37.5%	2–4	4–4	2–6
2009–10	2–14	12.5%	0–6	2–6	0–8
2008–09	0–16	0.0%	0–6	0–8	0–8
2007–08	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2006–07	3–13	18.8%	0–6	2–6	1–7

Green Bay Packers

The Green Bay Packers' 2025 season flipped with one moment against the Denver Broncos in Week 15. Late in the third quarter, Micah Parsons suffered a torn ACL in his left knee while chasing Denver quarterback Bo Nix. Green Bay devolved from a Super Bowl contender with a 9-3-1 record to losing its next three regular-season games. A 31-27 loss to the Chicago Bears in the NFC Wild Card round—one where the Packers blew a 21-3 half-time lead—was the stunning conclusion.

Green Bay coach Matt LaFleur took considerable criticism for the late-season collapse, but he signed an extension in the offseason along with general manager Brian Gutekunst. Ed Policy, the Packers CEO and president, chose stability over shaking up a franchise that has 18 playoff appearances since 2000.

The Packers have not enjoyed a trip to the Super Bowl since the 2010 season. There is more urgency after double-barrel losses to Chicago in the regular season and NFC playoffs. Defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley took the head coaching job at Miami and took six Green Bay coaches and quarterback Malik Willis with him. The Packers retained offensive coordinator Adam Stenavich and hired former Arizona Cardinals coach Jonathan Gannon as the new defensive coordinator. Green Bay faces new challenges in competing for the NFC playoffs.

RUNNING GAME

The Packers ranked 15th in the NFL with 119.8 rushing yards per game under Stenavich, which was a drop from the previous season when Green Bay ranked fifth with 146.8 rushing yards per game. Josh Jacobs had 929 yards and 13 TDs, which was down from 1,329 yards and 15 TDs the previous season. Jacobs, 28, is in the third year of a four-year, $48 million contract. He averaged four yards per carry but did not have 100 or more rushing yards in a single game last season.

Can Jacobs regain that explosiveness in the running game? According to Pro Football Focus, Jacobs had 24 runs or 10 yards or more in 2025, which was down from 34 the previous season. Green Bay ranked second in the NFL in third-down percentages (48.2%) but was inconsistent in short-yardage situations in critical moments. Jacobs remains the lead back for the Packers, at least for one more year.

Backup running back Emmanuel Wilson, who ran for 496 yards and three TDs last season, signed with Seattle. Chris Brooks and MarShawn Lloyd, a fifth-round pick in 2024 who has played in one game the last two seasons, comprise the rest of the backfield. The

Josh Jacobs

offensive line needs to improve in 2026. Tackle Rasheed Walker signed with Carolina, and veteran Elgton Jenkins was released before signing with Cleveland. That means the offensive line will see a few changes.

Sean Rhyan moved from guard to center last season, and he signed a three-year extension in the offseason. Aaron Banks made 14 starts last season, and Anthony Belton made seven starts. Those two should fill the guard positions. Jordan Morgan, a first-round pick in 2024, is on the spot at left tackle. Morgan made 12 starts last season. Zach Tom, the right tackle, struggled with injuries in 2025. He suffered a partially torn patellar tendon in the loss to the Broncos in Week 15. He also suffered a torn pectoral muscle in 2024. Tom is on a four-year, $88 million contract extension that runs through 2029. He is projected to be healthy for the start of the 2026 season.

PASSING GAME

The Packers ranked 17th in the NFL in pass offense with 212.8 yards per game last season. Jordan Love has posted a 27-20 record as Green Bay's starting quarterback since 2023. Love has improved with each year, and his $220 million contract runs through 2028. Love missed two games last season after suffering a concussion in Week 16 against the Bears. Love is an efficient QB with 83 TDs and 21 interceptions in his career, and he had six games with multiple TD passes and no interceptions in 2025. He increased his passer rating with each season and it hit 101.2 in 2025.

Green Bay quarterbacks are judged by playoff performance. Love is 1-3 as a starter in the playoffs, but he had 323 yards, four TDs and no interceptions in the playoff loss to the Bears. Willis left for Miami, which leaves Tyrod Taylor and Kyle McCord as backup options. Love missed seven starts in three seasons. The Packers have a receiver-by-committee approach that has produced results but lacks a true No. 1 receiver. Green Bay has not had a 1,000-yard receiver since Davante Adams put up 1,553 yards and 11 TDs in his final season with the team in 2021.

The Packers must replace its top receiver from 2025. Romeo Doubs, who led Green Bay with 55 catches for 724 yards and six TDs, signed with the Patriots via free agency. Doubs was a reliable target and had arguably his best season, which included five TDs in the red zone. The Packers need their top pass-catching options to stay healthy. Christian Watson returned from an ACL injury suffered in 2024. He had 611 yards and six TDs on 17.5 yards per catch. He is Love's most dynamic target in the deep passing game.

Jayden Reed suffered a broken clavicle in Week 2, which limited his production in 2025. He's still an excellent possession receiver. Reed has 74 catches on 97 targets the last two seasons, a 76.2% catch percentage. Matthew Golden, who Green Bay selected with the No. 23 pick in the 2025 NFL Draft, had a limited role in the offense. He flashed with four catches for 84 yards and a TD against the Bears in the NFC Wild Card round and should see

Jordan Love

by Bill Bender

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Minnesota Vikings	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 24	ATLANTA FALCONS	8:15 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	CHICAGO BEARS	4:25 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	DALLAS COWBOYS	8:20 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Detroit Lions	4:25 p.m.
8	Oct. 29	CAROLINA PANTHERS	8:15 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at New England Patriots	4:25 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	MINNESOTA VIKINGS	1:00 p.m.
11		BYE WEEK	
12	Nov. 25	at Los Angeles Rams	8:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at New Orleans Saints	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	BUFFALO BILLS	8:20 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	MIAMI DOLPHINS	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 25	at Chicago Bears	1:00 p.m.
17	Jan. 4	HOUSTON TEXANS	8:15 p.m.
18	TBD	DETROIT LIONS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Jordan Love	Tyrod Taylor
RB	Josh Jacobs	Chris Brooks
WR	Christian Watson	Savion Williams
WR	Jayden Reed	Bo Melton
WR	Matthew Golden	Skyy Moore
TE	Tucker Kraft	Luke Musgrave
LT	Jordan Morgan	Brant Banks
LG	Aaron Banks	Travis Glover
C	Sean Rhyan	Jager Burton
RG	Anthony Belton	Karsen Barnhart
RT	Zach Tom	Darian Kinnard

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Karl Brooks	Jaden Crumedy
NT	Devonte Wyatt	Jordon Riley
RDE	Javon Hargrave	Chris McClellan
WLB	Brenton Cox Jr.	Barryn Sorrell
LILB	Edgerrin Cooper	Ty'Ron Hopper
RILB	Zaire Franklin	Isaiah McDuffie
SLB	Micah Parsons	Lukas Van Ness
LCB	Keisean Nixon	Brandon Cisse
SS	Evan Williams	Jaylin Simpson
FS	Xavier McKinney	Kitan Oladapo
RCB	Carrington Valentine	Benjamin St-Juste

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Trey Smack	Daniel Whelan

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	52	CB	Brandon Cisse
3	77	DT	Chris McClellan
4	120	DE	Dani Dennis-Sutton
5	153	C	Jager Burton
6	201	CB	Domani Jackson

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	23	WR	Matthew Golden
2	54	OT	Anthony Belton
3	87	WR	Savion Williams
4	124	DE	Barryn Sorrell
5	159	LB	Collin Oliver

2024

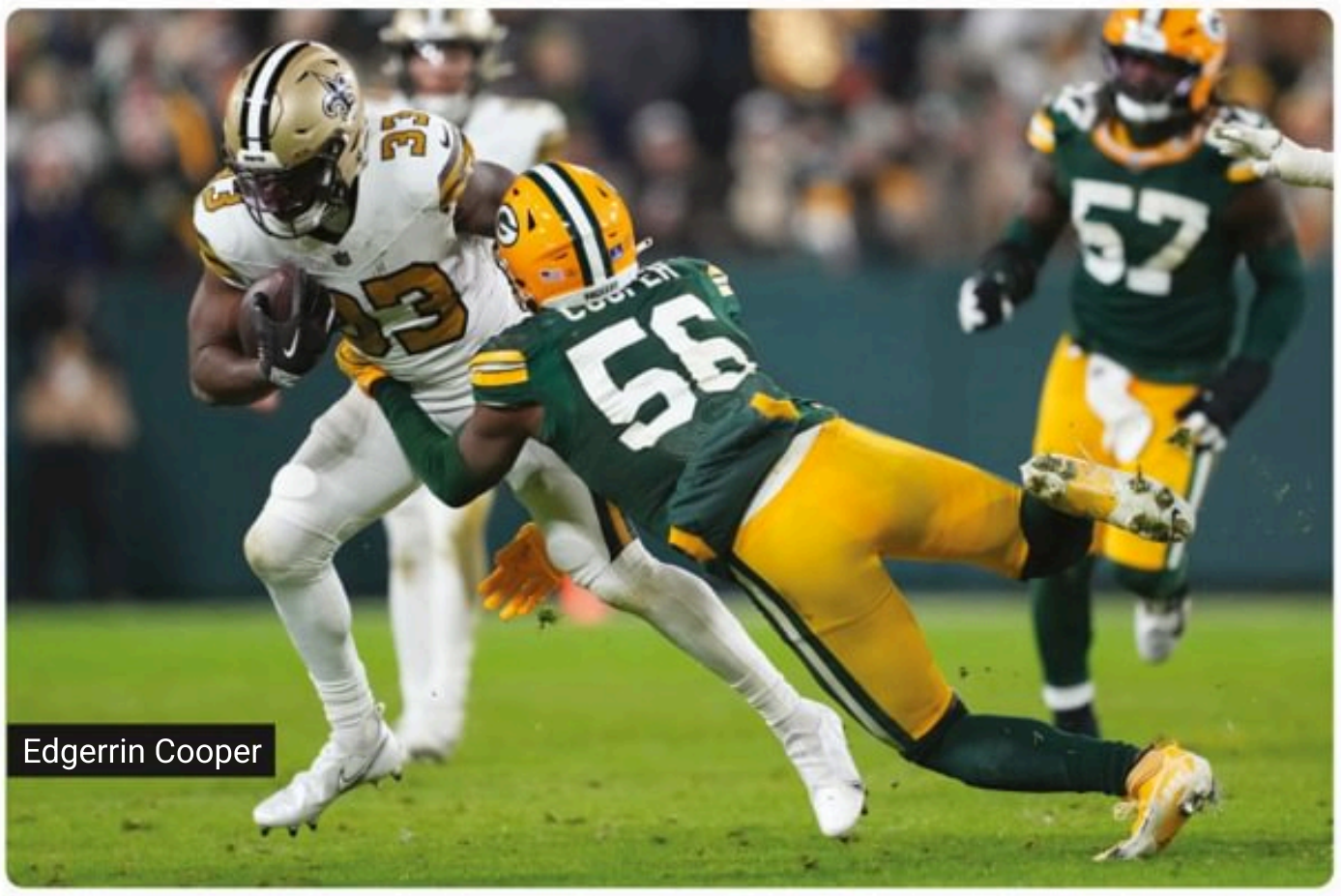
Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	25	OT	Jordan Morgan
2	45	LB	Edgerrin Cooper
2	58	S	Javon Bullard
3	88	RB	MarShawn Lloyd
3	91	LB	Ty'Ron Hopper

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	13	EDGE	Lukas Van Ness
2	42	TE	Luke Musgrave
2	50	WR	Jayden Reed
3	78	TE	Tucker Kraft
4	116	EDGE	Colby Wooden

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	22	LB	Quay Walker
1	28	DT	Devonte Wyatt
2	34	WR	Christian Watson
3	92	OT	Sean Rhyan
4	132	WR	Romeo Doubs



Edgerrin Cooper

a huge increase in targets as a second-year receiver. The Packers traded Dontayvion Wicks to the Eagles for a 2026 fifth-round pick on April 11. Savion Williams and Bo Melton, who played receiver and cornerback in 2025, are back. The Packers added Skyy Moore, a second-round pick who spent the last four seasons in Kansas City, through free agency.

Tight end Tucker Kraft, who suffered a season-ending torn ACL in Week 9 against Carolina, should be ready for the start of the season. Green Bay could take a cautious approach here, too. Before the injury, Kraft emerged as one of the best tight ends in the NFL with 32 catches for 489 yards and six TDs. That included a pair of 100-yard games. Love averaged 258.9 passing yards, a 70.8% completion percentage and 13 TDs with three interceptions in the eight games with Kraft last season. Luke Musgrave had 24 catches for 252 yards and remains a solid second tight end in the offense.

RUN DEFENSE

Parsons is targeting a return in either Week 3 or Week 4 this season, and his absence impacted every facet of the Packers' defense. Green Bay allowed 117.7 rushing yards per game, but that number ballooned to 198 yards per game in the final three games of the regular season. Gannon will transition to a 3-4 defense, and the Packers will look to clean up those mistakes against the run.

Part of the regression in run defense last season was due to the leg injury to defensive tackle Devonte Wyatt in Week 13. Wyatt enters a contract year. The Packers signed Javon Hargrave from Minnesota. Hargrave enters his 11th season. Karl Brooks, who started in seven games last year, is the favorite to start at defensive end.

Green Bay is solid at middle linebacker with Edgerrin Cooper, who had 118 tackles in a breakout season. The Packers added Zaire Franklin, who had 125 tackles last season and led the NFL with 173 tackles in 2024. He replaces Quay Walker, who signed with Las Vegas via free agency. Isaiah McDuffie adds depth at the position. Cooper and Franklin could be a nasty combination.

PASS DEFENSE

Parsons had 12.5 sacks and 27 quarterback hits in his first season with the Packers. He was a disruptive force, and the pass rush fell off after his injury. Green Bay traded veteran Rashan Gary to the Dallas Cowboys on March 11 in exchange for a fourth-round pick in 2027. Lukas Van Ness, a first-round pick in 2023, has 8.5 sacks in three seasons. He needs to step up opposite Parsons. Brenton Cox Jr. and Barryn Sorrell are other pass-rush options.

The Packers had just 14 takeaways last season, which was a dramatic drop from 31 in 2024. Xavier McKinney and Evan Williams are back at safety, and Javon Bullard had 83 tackles last season as the nickel defensive back. Williams and McKinney combined for five interceptions. Green Bay needs better cornerback play. Keisean Nixon had one interception and 17 pass breakups. Carrington Valentine is the other projected starter. Brandon Cisse, a second-round pick from South Carolina, will add to the competition.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Special teams were a glaring weakness for the Packers last season in those high-visibility losses to the Bears. Green Bay also had special teams miscues in the Week 3 loss at Cleveland and Week 4 tie at Dallas. The Packers parted ways with special teams coordinator Rich Bisaccia and hired Cam Achord, who was the assistant special teams coach for

Micah Parsons

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Matt LaFleur
First season with Packers: 2019
Regular-season record with Packers: 76–40–1 (65.4%)
Offensive coordinator: Adam Stenavich
Defensive coordinator: Jonathan Gannon
Special teams coordinator: Cameron Achord

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Passing game coordinator: Jason Vrable
Quarterbacks: Luke Getsy
Running backs: Ben Sirmans
Wide receivers: Noah Pauley
Assistant wide receivers: Rob Grosso
Tight ends: John Dunn
Offensive line: Luke Butkus
Assistant offensive line: Eddie Gordon
Pass game specialist/game management: Connor Lewis

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Vince Oghobaase
Outside linebackers/run game coord.: DeMarcus Covington
Linebackers: Sam Siefkes
Secondary/pass game coordinator: Bobby Babich
Cornerbacks: Daniel Bullocks
Defensive analyst: Scott Fuchs
Defensive quality control: Jamael Lett
Defensive quality control: Will Smart

the Giants the last two seasons.

Brandon McManus hit 24 of 30 (80%) of his field-goal attempts, but he missed two field goals and an extra point in the playoff loss against the Bears. That opened the door for the Packers to select Trey Smack in the sixth round of the 2026 draft as a replacement. Smack has a strong leg, but he will need to get used to NFC North conditions after playing at Florida.

Punter Daniel Whelan led the NFL with 51.7 yards per punt last season, and he was fourth in net punting average at 43.9 yards. Whelan has two years left on his contract. Moore was a steady return option for the Chiefs. He averaged 27.5 yards on kickoff returns and 11.5 yards on punt returns. Those areas should be consistent in 2026.

BOTTOM LINE

Parsons is on a four-year, $186 million contract that runs through 2029, so the Packers will not rush his return in 2026. Love is in the upper-tier of NFL QBs, but that gets solidified with a deep postseason. Those two players are the franchise pillars, and we saw what happened when one goes down. The respective returns of Wyatt and Kraft will help.

Most of the pressure is on LaFleur, who is 76-40-1 with six playoff appearances in seven seasons with the Packers. Yet his game management was roasted after the playoff loss to the Bears. Green Bay is 5-8 against NFC North opponents (including playoffs) the last two seasons. That will not cut it in 2026 with a schedule that includes the NFC South and AFC East. The second-place schedule means matchups with the Cowboys, Rams and Texans. How will the Packers respond in the division?

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	9–8–1	52.9%	4–3	5–3	4–5–1
2024–25	11–7	61.1%	1–5	6–3	5–3
2023–24	10–9	52.6%	4–2	5–3	5–6
2022–23	8–9	47.1%	3–3	5–3	3–5
2021–22	13–5	72.2%	4–2	8–1	5–3
2020–21	14–4	77.8%	5–1	8–2	6–2
2019–20	14–4	77.8%	6–0	8–1	6–3
2018–19	6–9–1	40.0%	1–4–1	5–2–1	1–7
2017–18	7–9	43.8%	2–4	4–4	3–5
2016–17	12–7	63.2%	5–1	7–2	5–5
2015–16	11–7	61.1%	3–3	5–3	6–4
2014–15	13–5	72.2%	5–1	9–0	4–5
2013–14	8–8–1	50.0%	3–2–1	4–4–1	4–4
2012–13	12–6	66.7%	6–1	8–1	4–5
2011–12	15–2	88.2%	6–0	8–1	7–1
2010–11	14–6	70.0%	5–2	7–1	6–5
2009–10	11–6	64.7%	4–2	6–2	5–4
2008–09	6–10	37.5%	4–2	4–4	2–6
2007–08	14–4	77.8%	4–2	8–2	6–2
2006–07	8–8	50.0%	5–1	3–5	5–3

Minnesota Vikings

The Minnesota Vikings finished 9-8 in 2025, but in the NFC North that is nowhere near good enough. The Vikings tied for last in the division, and that led to a change in the front office. General manager Kwesi Adofo-Mensah was fired on Jan. 30, and executive vice president of football operations Rob Brzezinski will serve as the interim GM.

Minnesota compiled a 43-25 record during Adofo-Mensah's tenure, but the change comes after the quarterback plan backfired in 2025. Sam Darnold, who led the Vikings to a 14-3 record in 2024, signed a three-year contract with Seattle. He led the Seahawks to a 29-13 victory against New England in Super Bowl 60. Second-year quarterback J.J. McCarthy, the No. 10 pick in the 2024 NFL Draft, struggled with injuries and inconsistency.

Minnesota coach Kevin O'Connell, who led the Vikings to a winning record in three of four seasons and two playoff appearances, enters a pivotal fifth year with a quarterback question. McCarthy will have competition from veteran Kyler Murray, a former No. 1 pick who spent seven seasons with the Arizona Cardinals. The Vikings retained offensive coordinator Wes Phillips, who has been with O'Connell from the start, and defensive coordinator Brian Flores, who guided a top-10 scoring defense each of the last two seasons.

RUNNING GAME

Minnesota ranked 23rd in the NFL with 108.3 rushing yards per game last season. The Vikings still averaged 4.5 yards per carry, which ranked 11th. The team simply did not generate enough rushing attempts in their wide-zone scheme. Jordan Mason, who spent his first four seasons with San Francisco before being traded to the Vikings, led the team with 758 rushing yards and six TDs. Mason's workload doesn't suggest he can be a full-time back in the NFL, having yet to record more than 16 carries in a single game with the Vikings. His usage rate was similar the prior season with the 49ers.

Mason enters the final year of his contract, and he will resume the time-share with veteran running back Aaron Jones. Jones, who turns 32 in December and enters his 10th season, agreed to a restructured contract. He had 548 rushing yards and two TDs last season, his lowest totals since his rookie year with Green Bay in 2017. Jones remains a viable option in the passing game. Zavier Scott had limited action as the third running back as a rookie, but Minnesota re-signed him in the offseason.

The offensive line faces one major question mark in 2026. Ryan Kelly, a four-time Pro Bowl center and 10-year veteran, retired after one season with the Vikings. Blake Brandel and Michel Jurgens are the in-house options for the position. Gavin Gerhardt, a seventh-round pick from Cincinnati, could get a shot. The rest of the offensive line is solid with four returning starters. Left tackle Christian Darrisaw played in 10 games last season before being shut down with a knee injury. Right tackle Brian O'Neill is entering his ninth season and working on a contract extension. The Vikings signed Buffalo tackle Ryan Van Demark via free agency and drafted Northwestern tackle Caleb Tiernan in the third round. Donovan Jackson, a first-round pick from Ohio State in 2025, made 14 starts as a rookie and should develop into a Pro Bowl-caliber player at left guard. Will Fries started in 17 games at right guard.

PASSING GAME

Murray, McCarthy and veteran Carson Wentz, who signed a one-year contract, make up the quarterback room. The Vikings ranked 29th in the NFL in pass offense last season, ahead of only the Titans, Browns and Jets. Minnesota quarterbacks also combined for 21 interceptions, which was the worst mark in the NFL. McCarthy took the majority of the criticism for the lack of production in the passing game. Injuries have played a role in the second-year quarterback's struggles. McCarthy missed his rookie year because of a knee injury. He missed five games last season because of a high ankle sprain and a concussion, and he exited the final regular-season game with a hand injury.

McCarthy finished 6-4 as a starter, and averaged 163.2 yards per game with a 57.6% completion percentage and 12 TDs and 11 interceptions. McCarthy won four straight starts at the end of 2025, so he will factor into the QB competition. Murray signed a one-year, $1.3 million contract, and if he wins the starting job that means McCarthy moves to backup quarterback with two years left on a $21.8 million contract. Murray also had dealt with injuries throughout his career.

Murray has 20,460 career passing yards with 121 TDs and 60 interceptions while averaging 6.0 yards per carry. Murray also grew up a Vikings' fan, which could make him a fan favorite in the competition. It's an interesting decision. Murray is the more proven option, and he is likely where O'Connell will lean at least to start the season. Minnesota needs more production considering the other quarterbacks in the NFC North. Detroit's Jared Goff (4,564 passing yards) and Chicago's Caleb Williams (3,942 yards)

Aaron Jones

by Bill Bender

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	GREEN BAY PACKERS	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Chicago Bears	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	4:05 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	MIAMI DOLPHINS	4:05 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at New Orleans Saints	1:00 p.m.
6		BYE WEEK	
7	Oct. 25	INDIANAPOLIS COLTS	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Detroit Lions	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 9	BUFFALO BILLS	8:15 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Green Bay Packers	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	8:20 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	ATLANTA FALCONS	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	CAROLINA PANTHERS	4:25 p.m.
14	Dec. 10	at New England Patriots	8:15 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	DETROIT LIONS	8:20 p.m.
16	TBD	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	TBD
17	Jan. 3	at New York Jets	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	CHICAGO BEARS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Kyler Murray	J.J. McCarthy
RB	Aaron Jones Sr.	Jordan Mason
WR	Justin Jefferson	Jeshaun Jones
WR	Jordan Addison	Myles Price
WR	Tai Felton	Dontae Fleming
TE	T.J. Hockenson	Josh Oliver
LT	Christian Darrisaw	Caleb Tiernan
LG	Donovan Jackson	Joe Huber
C	Blake Brandel	Michael Jurgens
RG	Will Fries	Henry Byrd
RT	Brian O'Neill	Ryan Van Demark

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Levi Drake Rodriguez	-
NT	Caleb Banks	Domonique Orange
RDE	Jalen Redmond	Tyrion Ingram-Dawkins
WLB	Andrew Van Ginkel	Bo Richter
LILB	Eric Wilson	Jake Golday
RILB	Blake Cashman	Ivan Pace Jr.
SLB	Dallas Turner	Chaz Chambliss
LCB	Isaiah Rodgers	James Pierre
SS	Joshua Metellus	Jay Ward
FS	Theo Jackson	Jakobe Thomas
RCB	Byron Murphy Jr.	Dwight McGlothern

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Will Reichard	Johnny Hekker

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	18	DE	Caleb Banks
2	51	LB	Jake Golday
3	82	DT	Domonique Orange
3	97	T	Caleb Tiernan
3	98	S	Jakobe Thomas

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	24	G	Donovan Jackson
3	102	WR	Tai Felton
5	139	DE	Tyrion Ingram-Dawkins
6	201	LB	Kobe King
6	202	TE	Gavin Bartholomew

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	10	QB	J.J. McCarthy
1	17	EDGE	Dallas Turner
4	108	CB	Khyree Jackson
6	177	OT	Walter Rouse
6	203	K	Will Reichard

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	23	WR	Jordan Addison
3	87	DB	Ji'Ayir Brown
3	102	CB	Mekhi Blackmon
5	141	DT	Jacquelin Roy
5	164	QB	Jaren Hall

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	32	S	Lewis Cine
2	42	CB	Andrew Booth Jr.
2	59	G	Ed Ingram
3	66	LB	Brian Asamoah
4	118	CB	Akayleb Evans

Jalen Redmond

ranked second and seventh in the NFL in passing yards, respectively. Green Bay's Jordan Love (3,381 yards) ranked 13th and missed two games.

The quarterback who establishes the best connection with Justin Jefferson will be the starter. Jefferson managed 84 catches for 1,048 yards with a career-low two TDs in 2025 with three different starting quarterbacks. He had a 59.8% catch percentage, and he was not the same downfield threat in the offense. According to Pro Football Focus, Jefferson had just five catches on passes of 20 yards or more with no TDs. That was down from 15 catches for 536 yards and four TDs on passes of 20 yards or more in 2025. Jefferson has the largest contract on the roster, a four-year, $140 deal that stretches into 2028. He is one of the most dynamic receivers in the NFL, and the Vikings have to do a better job getting him the ball this year.

Minnesota picked up a fifth-year option on receiver Jordan Addison, who emerged as a reliable receiver opposite Jefferson. That keeps the former first-round pick with the Vikings for two more seasons. Addison saw a dip in production with 42 receptions for 610 yards and three TDs. He averaged 14.5 yards per catch. Jalen Nailor signed with Las Vegas in free agency, and the Vikings responded by signing Jauan Jennings, who had 643 yards and nine touchdowns for San Francisco last season. Tai Felton, a third-round pick in 2025, also could see more targets. Tight end T.J. Hockenson, who is 29 this season, is in the final year of his contract. He has 11 TD receptions in four seasons with the Vikings. That is also a position where Minnesota could bring in competition for the future.

RUN DEFENSE

Minnesota ranked 21st in run defense at 124.1 yards per game last season. The Vikings were 1-5 when they allowed 140 rushing yards or more, and they surrendered 200-plus rushing yards in two games. Minnesota runs a 3-4 defense with Flores, and they need to be more disruptive on the interior. Linebacker Eric Wilson led the Vikings with 115 tackles and 17 tackles for loss in his first season back with the team. He is the best run stopper in the middle. Blake

Cashman added 144 tackles. Ivan Pace added 62 tackles. The linebackers remain a team strength.

The defensive line lost defensive tackle Jonathan Allen, who signed with Cincinnati in free agency. Allen had 68 tackles and seven tackles for loss in one season with Minnesota. Defensive end Jalen Redmond had 62 tackles and six sacks. Defensive end Tyrion Dawkins-Ingram and Levi Drake Rodriguez are inexperienced options on the defensive front. Minnesota addressed that depth with defensive tackles Caleb Banks, a first-round pick from Florida, and Domonique Orange, a third-round pick from Iowa State.

PASS DEFENSE

The Vikings ranked second in the NFL in pass defense at 158.5 yards per game, and they were tied for fourth in the NFL with 49 sacks. Minnesota allowed 300-plus passing yards in only one game in 2025, and this is the strength of the defense.

Jonathan Greenard, who had just three sacks last season after 12 in 2024, was traded to Philadelphia during the 2026 NFL Draft. Dallas Turner had eight sacks, and Andrew Van Ginkel had seven.

Minnesota, however, had just eight interceptions. There is uncertainty whether safety Harrison Smith, a 14-year veteran who ranks fourth in franchise history with 39 career interceptions, returns for another season. Smith has yet to announce his retirement. Third-year safety Jay Ward would be in line to start if Smith retires. Joshua Metellus totaled 305 tackles the last three seasons as the starting strong safety. Minnesota also added Miami safety Jakobe Thomas in the third round.

Byron Murphy has eight interceptions the last two seasons as a nickel back. Isaiah Rodgers, who had one interception and four pass breakups last season, and James Pierre, a free-agent pickup from Pittsburgh, are expected to start at cornerback. The Vikings need to create more turnovers in 2026.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Special teams coach Matt Daniels continues to lead an outstanding group. Second-year kicker Will Reichard connected on 33 of 35 field-goal attempts, including 11 of 13 from 50 yards or more. Reichard was named a first-team All-Pro selection by the Associated Press.

The Vikings signed veteran punter Johnny Hekker, a four-time Pro Bowl selection who averages 46.8 yards per punt for his career. Hekker will serve as the holder, and long-snapper Andrew DePaola is a three-time Pro Bowl selection. Myles Price is a solid returner on kickoffs and returns. He ranked third in kickoff return yards (1,479) and ninth in punt return yards (298).

BOTTOM LINE

Minnesota still had a winning record last season, and the Vikings were 4-2 against NFC North opponents. One of those victories was in Week 18 against Green Bay when the Packers were resting starters ahead of the playoffs. Minnesota has been good in one-score games under O'Connell. The Vikings were 6-3 in games decided by eight points or less last season, but that was checked by a 4-4 record at home.

The schedule features the AFC East and NFC South, and a last-place schedule has its benefits this year. Ultimately, it comes down to the quarterback production. It does not matter if it's Murray or McCarthy. The Vikings need more to compete with three playoff-caliber teams within the division.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Kevin O'Connell
First season with Vikings: 2022
Regular-season record with Vikings: 43–25 (63.2%)
Offensive coordinator: Wes Phillips
Defensive coordinator: Brian Flores
Special teams coordinator: Matt Daniels

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Assistant offensive coordinator: Chris O'Hara
Quarterbacks: Josh McCown
Assistant quarterbacks: Jordan Traylor
Running backs: Curtis Modkins
Wide receivers: Keenan McCardell
Assistant wide receivers: Derron Montgomery
Tight ends/game management coordinator: Ryan Cordell
Offensive line: Keith Carter
Assistant offensive line: Derek Warehime

DEFENSE

Defensive running game coordinator: Ryan Nielsen
Assistant defensive line: Patrick Hill
Outside linebackers: Thad Bogardus
Inside linebackers: Mike Siravo
Assistant linebackers: Dalmin Gibson
Pass game coordinator/defensive backs: Gerald Alexander
Assistant defensive backs: Chenzo Funari
Defensive assistant: Charlie Frye
Defensive assistant: Will Johnson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	9–8	52.9%	4–2	4–4	4–3
2024–25	14–4	77.8%	4–2	7–1	6–2
2023–24	7–10	41.2%	2–4	2–6	5–4
2022–23	13–5	72.2%	4–2	8–2	4–3
2021–22	8–9	47.1%	4–2	5–3	3–6
2020–21	7–9	43.8%	4–2	3–5	4–4
2019–20	11–7	61.1%	2–4	6–2	5–5
2018–19	8–7–1	53.3%	3–2–1	5–3	3–4–1
2017–18	14–4	77.8%	5–1	8–1	5–3
2016–17	8–8	50.0%	2–4	5–3	3–5
2015–16	11–6	64.7%	5–1	6–3	5–3
2014–15	7–9	43.8%	1–5	5–3	2–6
2013–14	5–10–1	33.3%	2–3–1	4–3	0–7–1
2012–13	10–7	58.8%	4–3	7–1	3–6
2011–12	3–13	18.8%	0–6	1–7	2–6
2010–11	6–10	37.5%	1–5	4–4	2–6
2009–10	13–5	72.2%	5–1	9–0	4–5
2008–09	10–7	58.8%	4–2	6–3	4–4
2007–08	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–5
2006–07	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5

Atlanta Falcons

Bijan Robinson

Would it surprise you to know that the Falcons own the NFL's second-longest playoff drought at eight seasons? For most of that span, Atlanta has lived in NFL purgatory—consistently hovering around seven or eight wins over the past five years, but never breaking through, even in one of the league's weaker divisions. There are still reasons for optimism. The Falcons have turned to former Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski in hopes of maximizing a roster that has flashed talent but rarely clicked at the same time. The low-risk move to acquire former Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa signaled a willingness to change course, even with Michael Penix Jr. still in the mix for starting duties.

Stefanski's track record suggests he should be able to get more out of Atlanta's skill-position group. If the quarterback situation settles and the offense finds rhythm, the Falcons have the playmakers to be dangerous. On the other side of the ball, there are also emerging young defensive pieces that could help raise the ceiling. Still, this remains a "good-but-not-great" roster with clear volatility and questions to answer. The range of outcomes is wide, but the baseline expectation is that Atlanta stays in the wild-card hunt. If Stefanski and the quarterback situation stabilize quickly, will 2026 finally be the year the Falcons end their long postseason drought?

RUNNING GAME

This has been the backbone of the Falcons' offense for the last three seasons, largely thanks to one player: Bijan Robinson. The running back, named a First-Team All-Pro selection in 2025, isn't just one of the NFL's best at his position—he's now in the upper echelon of game-changing offensive talents. Robinson piled up a career-high 820 receiving yards last season on top of a heavy rushing workload, and all indications point to another feature-heavy role in 2026. Atlanta tends to function at its best when Robinson is heavily involved, and that likely won't change under Stefanski and new offensive coordinator Tommy Rees. If anything, his workload could increase. With Tyler Allgeier departing for the Cardinals in free agency after a 514-yard, eight-touchdown season in 2025, Robinson could approach, or even challenge, for the league lead in carries after finishing fifth last year.

To help absorb some of that lost depth in Allgeier, the Falcons signed Brian Robinson Jr.—creating a "B. Robinson" backfield that will undoubtedly confuse fantasy managers. However, Robinson Jr. is coming off just 92 carries for the 49ers in 2025 and projects more as a short-yardage and goal-line complement rather than a true rotational replacement for Allgeier's volume. Robinson Jr. was once a starter in Washington, so he is capable of filling that role if needed, but he's better off providing short-term relief to Bijan Robinson. Behind the Robinsons, Tyler Goodson and second-year back Nathan Carter provide some emergency depth.

On the offensive line, Atlanta returns four of five starters, with veteran Jawaan Taylor, the former Chief, stepping in at right tackle following Kaleb McGary's retirement. Taylor has battled penalties throughout his career, but on just a one-year, $5 million deal, the Falcons are betting on a rebound. Generally, this offensive line has ranked around league average in run blocking, though even modest improvement could help Robinson sustain elite production. With more uncertainty at quarterback and questions in the passing game, leaning on Robinson remains Stefanski's clearest path to offensive stability. If Atlanta can control games on the ground,

Robinson should once again be among the NFL's most dominant players in 2026.

PASSING GAME

Just about one thing is certain in the Falcons' passing game: a left-handed quarterback will be starting. Beyond that, the situation remains unsettled, though the return of Kyle Pitts on the franchise tag and the presence of Drake London give Atlanta a relatively high floor even with some uncertainty. A quarterback competition appears to be brewing between Penix Jr. and Tagovailoa. Despite a three-year age gap, the two seem to share some stylistic similarities, even beyond their left-handedness. Both have proven most effective in timing-based systems that emphasize quick, structured reads and short-to-intermediate throws. Neither is a dynamic runner, but both have enough mobility to extend plays when necessary. Additionally, they each bring respective injury concerns and up-and-down career trajectories that have left questions about long-term reliability.

In many ways, the Tagovailoa signing is putting immediate pressure on both quarterbacks to succeed in 2026. With Penix recovering from a knee injury that limited him in 2025, the starting job seems to be up for grabs. In all likelihood, both quarterbacks will see the field at some point this season, with overall performance determining the long-term direction. For Stefanski and Rees, the challenge will be less about naming a Week 1 starter and more about bringing the Falcons their most stable quarterback room in years. Fortunately, both quarterbacks, and Stefanski, are inheriting a strong supporting cast. Pitts showed more encouraging signs than ever in 2025, posting his most productive receiving season since his rookie year and reestablishing himself as a legitimate threat. London also continues to function as a high-end WR1 and red-zone weapon, though both players arguably still have untapped upside within a more structured system.

by Daniel Mader

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Pittsburgh Steelers	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	CAROLINA PANTHERS	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 24	at Green Bay Packers	8:15 p.m.
4	Oct. 5	at New Orleans Saints	8:15 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	BALTIMORE RAVENS	8:20 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	CHICAGO BEARS	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	vs. Cincinnati Bengals (in Madrid)	9:30 a.m.
10	Nov. 15	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	1:00 p.m.
11		BYE WEEK	
12	Nov. 29	at Minnesota Vikings	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	DETROIT LIONS	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Cleveland Browns	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Washington Commanders	1:00 p.m.
16	TBD	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	TBD
17	Jan. 3	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at Carolina Panthers	TBD

Michael Penix Jr.

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Michael Penix Jr.	Tua Tagovailoa
RB	Bijan Robinson	Brian Robinson Jr.
WR	Drake London	Zachariah Branch
WR	Jahan Dotson	Dylan Drummond
WR	Olamide Zaccheaus	Deven Thompkins
TE	Kyle Pitts Sr.	Austin Hooper
LT	Jake Matthews	Michael Jerrell
LG	Matthew Bergeron	Kyle Hinton
C	Ryan Neuzil	Corey Levin
RG	Chris Lindstrom	Andrew Stueber
RT	Jawaan Taylor	Storm Norton

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Brandon Dorlus	LaCale London
NT	Da'Shawn Hand	Maason Smith
RDE	Zach Harrison	Chris Williams
WLB	Jalon Walker	Cameron Thomas
LILB	Divine Deablo	Channing Tindall
RILB	Christian Harris	JD Bertrand
SLB	James Pearce Jr.	Samson Ebukam
LCB	A.J. Terrell Jr.	Clark Phillips III
SS	Jessie Bates III	Jammie Robinson
FS	Xavier Watts	Sydney Brown
RCB	Mike Hughes	Avieon Terrell

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Nick Folk	Jake Bailey

Jalon Walker

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	48	CB	Avieon Terrell
3	79	WR	Zachariah Branch
4	134	LB	Kendal Daniels
6	208	DT	Anterio Thompson
6	215	LB	Harold Perkins Jr.

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	15	LB	Jalon Walker
1	26	DE	James Pearce Jr.
3	96	S	Xavier Watts
4	118	S	Billy Bowman Jr.
7	218	OT	Jack Nelson

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	8	QB	Michael Penix
2	35	DT	Ruke Orhorhoro
3	74	EDGE	Bralen Trice
4	109	DT	Brandon Dorlus
5	143	LB	JD Bertrand

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	8	RB	Bijan Robinson
2	38	OL	Matthew Bergeron
3	75	DE	Zach Harrison
4	113	CB	Clark Phillips
7	224	S	DeMarcco Hellams

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	8	WR	Drake London
2	38	OLB	Arnold Ebiketie
2	58	LB	Troy Andersen
3	74	QB	Desmond Ridder
3	82	LB	DeAngelo Malone

Pitts is the player who could benefit most from the offseason offensive changes. Stefanski guided David Njoku to some strong seasons in Cleveland, and the former No. 4 overall pick has plenty of talent to utilize.

Pass-catching depth is a concern. Bijan Robinson ranked third on the team in receiving last season, highlighting how heavily the offense leaned on its star running back. Meanwhile, the departure of Darnell Mooney and the additions of Jahan Dotson and Olamide Zaccheaus—who combined for just 575 receiving yards in 2025—leaves Atlanta without a proven third option. Atlanta also drafted speedster Zachariah Branch in the third round, a shifty and dynamic slot option out of Georgia who profiles similarly to Kansas City's Xavier Worthy.

On the offensive line, McGary's retirement, and the Taylor signing in response, was a notable shift at right tackle, especially for pass-protection—unlike most NFL teams, the Falcons' top two quarterbacks are both "blind" on the right end of the line, not the left side. Regardless of the starting passer, Atlanta is banking on Taylor stabilizing the position after an inconsistent tenure in Kansas City. Ultimately, Stefanski's first priority will be resolving the quarterback competition. From there, the success of the passing game will hinge on whether London and Pitts can be fully maximized at the same time. If Atlanta is going to push toward the playoffs in 2026, the offense will have to evolve a bit from its run-centric focus to consistently threaten defenses through the air.

RUN DEFENSE

The Falcons weren't in the worst tier of run defenses last season, but they also weren't very good. After allowing 126.2 rushing yards per game (24th in NFL), this is an area the team will be looking to steadily improve upon as Stefanski takes over. For that reason, adding interior size was a modest offseason priority. The Falcons re-signed LaCale London, a near-300-pound lineman who proved to fit well in defensive line coach Nate Ollie's system. They also added veteran defensive tackles Chris Williams and Da'Shawn Hand, the latter entering his eighth NFL season after starting 13 games for the Chargers in 2025. Hand projects as a likely starter due to his experience and reliability. Even if they weren't the most high-impact additions, those moves were made with intentions to stabilize the middle of the defense, needing more consistency to stop the run.

Atlanta is not expected to become an elite run-stopping unit—Jeff Ulbrich's blitz-heavy identity remains in-place—but more reliability would represent progress. If the group can collectively hold up better at the line of scrimmage, Atlanta should at least move closer to league-average efficiency against the run in 2026, easing pressure on the rest of the defense.

PASS DEFENSE

Thanks to a versatile defensive group, Atlanta appears to be in a great place with its pass defense, both in the secondary and up front. The Falcons finished second in the NFL in total sacks in 2025, production that came from multiple levels of the defense. James Pearce Jr. led the way with 10.5 sacks as a rookie, while Jalon Walker also added 5.5 in his first season. Brandon Dorlus (8.5 sacks) and Ruke Orhorhoro (3.5) also provided interior pressure. Even if Atlanta had largely stood pat this offseason, the 2026 pass rush would have looked formidable once again. Still, with Pearce's offseason legal situation creating uncertainty and the departure of linebacker Kaden Elliss, the Falcons added some depth in Cameron Thomas,

Christian Harris, Azeez Ojulari and Samson Ebukam. Even with natural regression from last year's sack totals, Atlanta projects to remain one of the NFL's more aggressive and effective blitzing units under Ulbrich.

The secondary is just as encouraging. Safety remains a strength with Jesse Bates III and Xavier Watts forming one of the league's better duos; Bates had a bit of a down 2025 by his standards, but he remains a strong run defender and stabilizing presence, while Watts impressed as a playmaker with five interceptions as a rookie. At cornerback, A.J. Terrell continues to anchor the unit as a reliable CB1, even with some penalty concerns and a step back from his All-Pro peak. What's better than one Terrell? Two Terrells! Atlanta spent its highest draft pick on his brother Avieon, taking the physical Clemson corner in the middle of the second round. Even if both Terrells don't start—Mike Hughes enters as the other likely starter—Atlanta could field an elite secondary. While repeating a 57-sack season may be difficult, the combination of secondary talent and scheme continuity gives Atlanta a high defensive floor heading into 2026.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Falcons' special teams in 2025 was among the league's weakest units, making improvement in 2026 nearly inevitable. Atlanta cycled through two kickers before settling on Zane Gonzalez, a move that came far too late. To fix that issue, the Falcons signed veteran Nick Folk to a two-year deal, betting on the 41-year-old's long track record of consistency. They also upgraded at punter with former All-Pro Jake Bailey, moving on from Bradley Pinion. New special teams coordinator Craig Aukerman takes over a unit that must provide more support to both offense and defense this year.

BOTTOM LINE

The Falcons have consistently had the talent to contend in the NFC South, but they've been the same team in recent years: good, but not good enough. A change in leadership may be what they needed. Stefanski helped elevate the Browns from long-term irrelevance to two playoff appearances, and he's inheriting a talented roster. If Stefanski can unlock Tagovailoa or Penix, the Falcons could have a path to playoff contention. In a weak division, the Falcons are hoping not only to avoid bottoming out but to also avoid having another seven- or eight-win season.

A.J. Terrell

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Kevin Stefanski
Went 45–56 (44.6%) as Browns head coach, 2020–25
Went 1–2 (33.3%) in post-season as Browns head coach
Offensive coordinator: Tommy Rees
Defensive coordinator: Jeff Ulbrich
Special teams coordinator: Craig Aukerman

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Passing game coordinator: Tanner Engstrand
Quarterbacks: Alex Van Pelt
Assistant quarterbacks: Jordan Reid
Running backs: Michael Pitre
Wide receivers: Robert Prince
Tight ends: Kevin Koger
Offensive line: Bill Callahan
Assistant offensive line: Matt Jones / Nick Jones
Offensive assistant: Michael Bearden

DEFENSE

Defensive passing game coordinator: Patrick Toney
Defensive line: Nate Ollie
Outside linebackers: John Timu
Inside linebackers: Barrett Ruud
Secondary: Justin Hood
Assistant defensive backs/nickels: Ricky Manning
Senior defensive assistant: Dave Huxtable
Defensive quality control: Troy Kruchten

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	8–9	47.1%	3–3	4–4	4–4
2024–25	8–9	47.1%	4–2	4–5	4–4
2023–24	7–10	41.2%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2022–23	7–10	41.2%	2–4	6–3	1–7
2021–22	7–10	41.2%	2–4	1–6	5–4
2020–21	4–12	25.0%	1–5	2–6	2–6
2019–20	7–9	43.8%	4–2	3–5	4–4
2018–19	7–9	43.8%	4–2	4–4	3–5
2017–18	11–7	61.1%	4–2	5–3	6–4
2016–17	13–6	68.4%	5–1	7–3	6–2
2015–16	8–8	50.0%	1–5	4–4	4–4
2014–15	6–10	37.5%	5–1	3–4	3–5
2013–14	4–12	25.0%	1–5	3–5	1–7
2012–13	14–4	77.8%	3–3	8–2	6–2
2011–12	10–7	58.8%	3–3	6–2	4–5
2010–11	13–4	76.5%	5–1	7–2	6–2
2009–10	9–7	56.3%	3–3	6–2	3–5
2008–09	11–6	64.7%	3–3	7–1	4–5
2007–08	4–12	25.0%	1–5	3–5	1–7
2006–07	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4

Carolina Panthers

An 8-9 record in 2025 marked a long-awaited step forward for the Panthers. It wasn't always convincing, but sneaking into the playoffs and giving the Rams a scare over wild card weekend signaled real progress. The next step? Turning baseline competitiveness into true contention—and Carolina's defensive additions this offseason suggest the organization believes it's ready to raise its ceiling. Bryce Young remains the central question. Can he continue progressing toward the level expected of a No. 1 overall pick? If his development continues to stall, the timeline on his status as the Panthers' long-term starter could begin to shorten. After leaning heavily on the run game in 2025, Carolina will likely be asking more of Young in 2026.

The NFC South has consistently been one of the NFL's most winnable divisions, meaning even modest improvement could have significant implications for the Panthers. Carolina added high-level defensive veterans, so Young's continued development is the key. There's still plenty for Carolina to prove, but for the first time in years, there's a sense of meaningful football on the way in 2026.

RUNNING GAME

Rico Dowdle's emergence—highlighted by two 180-plus-yard performances—gave the Panthers' offense a massive boost in 2025. Once Chuba Hubbard returned, Carolina formed a productive 1-2 punch at running back, though the duo's efficiency tapered off late in the season. Now, Dowdle is gone, leaving Hubbard as the de facto lead back once again. After a 1,195-yard campaign in 2024, however, Hubbard didn't always look the same in 2025. He ceded his lead role to Dowdle at times, and his 3.8 yards per carry ranked outside the top 40 among all running backs.

A bounce-back season for Hubbard would be a major boost

for Carolina's 2026 offense, particularly considering the team didn't heavily invest in replacing Dowdle. If he can stay healthy, 2024 second-rounder Jonathan Brooks could also have a path to a larger role—he flashed elite potential during his 2023 season at Texas, but injuries have continually kept him off the field in the NFL. Brooks is expected to be ready for the new season. If Hubbard struggles, there's a real opportunity for Brooks to become the team's starting running back. The addition of AJ Dillon also gives head coach Dave Canales a reliable veteran option, especially in short-yardage and red-zone situations, although Dillon isn't likely to take on a heavy workload.

Up front, the Panthers swapped out Cade Mays for Luke Fortner at center, a steady pass blocker who should be a capable starter in 2026. With Ikem Ekwonu recovering from an injury that could linger into the season, Carolina also added Stone Forsythe and Rasheed Walker, either of whom could open the year at left tackle.

identity in 2025, the Panthers now face more uncertainty in that area. If they're to return to the playoffs, it will likely require Hubbard, Brooks and Dillon to collectively provide a stable foundation for the offense.

PASSING GAME

The Panthers still don't have a definitive answer on what they have in Young, who enters his fourth year. At times, he has looked far from a former Heisman Trophy winner and Alabama standout—taking too many sacks, struggling with turnovers and reinforcing pre-draft concerns about his size. At other points, including a strong stretch in the second half of 2025, Young showed legitimate growth. He threw for nearly 450 yards against the Falcons in November, and from that game through the end of the regular season, he posted 12 touchdown passes to just four interceptions. Young also accounted for both a passing and rushing touchdown in Carolina's playoff loss to the Rams.

Arguably the biggest X-factor for Carolina's 2026 division hopes

by Daniel Mader

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	CHICAGO BEARS	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Atlanta Falcons	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Cleveland Browns	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	DETROIT LIONS	8:20 p.m.
5		BYE WEEK	
6	Oct. 18	at Philadelphia Eagles	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	1:00 p.m.
8	Oct. 29	at Green Bay Packers	8:15 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	DENVER BRONCOS	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at New Orleans Saints	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	BALTIMORE RAVENS	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 30	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	8:15 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at Minnesota Vikings	4:25 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	CINCINNATI BENGALS	1:00 p.m.
16	TBD	at Pittsburgh Steelers	TBD
17	Jan. 3	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	ATLANTA FALCONS	TBD

Chuba Hubbard

Though 19th overall pick Monroe Freeling is a longer-term project, the offensive tackle from Georgia grades off the charts athletically and is a high-ceiling roll of the dice who could eventually evolve into a franchise left tackle.

Given the offseason turnover around the run game, matching last year's early-season production may be difficult. Still, establishing the run will remain essential to unlocking Young at his best—he has played some of his best football when Carolina is also controlling the line of scrimmage. After leaning into a run-heavy

may be whether Young can sustain that upward trajectory. He's now shown he can process at a high level within an NFL offense and use his mobility to stress defenses, but consistency remains key. The best version of Young can still be one of the NFL's top young quarterbacks. Part of Young's late-season 2025 improvements coincided with better support at wide receiver. Tetairoa McMillan, in particular, looks like a budding star. His 1,014 yards and seven touchdowns as a rookie arguably exceeded expectations as the No. 8 pick, and he has already

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Bryce Young	Kenny Pickett
RB	Chuba Hubbard	Jonathon Brooks
WR	Tetairoa McMillan	Chris Brazzell II
WR	Jalen Coker	Jimmy Horn Jr.
WR	Xavier Legette	John Metchie III
TE	Ja'Tavion Sanders	Tommy Tremble
LT	Ikem Ekwonu	Rasheed Walker
LG	Damien Lewis	Saahdiq Charles
C	Luke Fortner	Sam Hecht
RG	Robert Hunt	Chandler Zavala
RT	Taylor Moton	Monroe Freeling

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Derrick Brown	-
NT	Bobby Brown III	Lee Hunter
RDE	Tershawn Wharton	LaBryan Ray
WLB	Nic Scourton	Patrick Jones II
LILB	Devin Lloyd	Claudin Cherelus
RILB	Trevin Wallace	Bam Martin-Scott
SLB	Jaelan Phillips	Princely Umanmielen
LCB	Mike Jackson	Akayleb Evans
SS	Tre'von Moehrig	Zakee Wheatley
FS	Nick Scott	Lathan Ransom
RCB	Jaycee Horn	Robert Rochell

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Ryan Fitzgerald	Sam Martin

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	19	T	Monroe Freeling
2	49	DT	Lee Hunter
3	83	WR	Chris Brazzell II
4	129	CB	Will Lee III
5	144	C	Sam Hecht

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	8	WR	Tetairoa McMillan
2	51	DE	Nic Scourton
3	77	DE	Princely Umanmielen
4	114	RB	Trevor Etienne
4	122	S	Lathan Ransom

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	32	WR	Xavier Legette
2	46	RB	Jonathon Brooks
3	72	LB	Trevin Wallace
4	101	TE	Ja'Tavion Sanders
5	157	CB	Chau Smith-Wade

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	1	QB	Bryce Young
2	39	WR	Jonathan Mingo
3	80	LB	DJ Johnson
4	114	G	Chandler Zavala
5	145	S	Jammie Robinson

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	6	OT	Ikem Ekwonu
3	94	QB	Matt Corral
4	120	LB	Brandon Smith
6	189	LB	Amaré Barno
6	199	G	Cade Mays

Tre'von Moehrig

emerged as one of the NFL's best receivers, especially in the red zone.

Alongside McMillan, Carolina brings back some intriguing complementary pieces in Jalen Coker and Xavier Legette, giving the receiver room a solid mix of size and speed. Legette is a player that the Panthers will want further development from—as a 2024 first-round pick, he has yet to eclipse 500 yards in a season. If Legette can't increase his production, Jimmy Horn Jr. is a player that didn't get a ton of opportunities as a rookie with 108 yards, but could step up in the 2026 wide receiver room. Watch out for 6-foot-4 rookie Chris Brazzell II, drafted in the third round. The All-SEC speedster from Tennessee (he clocked a 4.37 in the 40-yard-dash) gives Young another towering big-play threat. Despite some untapped talent at wide receiver, the Panthers' tight end group remains underwhelming. The team's tight ends combined for just 467 yards last season, with Tommy Tremble leading the unit with 249.

For the passing game to evolve, Carolina needs to better utilize the middle of the field. Canales likely knows what he has in Tremble, entering his sixth year with the team, but Ja'Tavion Sanders, a 2024 fourth-round pick with just over 500 career receiving yards, is a candidate for an expanded role. Sanders hasn't become a fully reliable pass-catcher quite yet, but additional production from the tight end room in the red zone would help ease the burden on McMillan. Statistically, this wasn't a very good team through the air in 2025, ranking 26th in the NFL with 179.3 passing yards per game. A strong run game and opportunistic defense helped offset those limitations, but that formula has its ceiling.

For Carolina to emerge as a true contender in the NFC, Young will need to take another step, with a capable backup in Kenny Pickett putting some light pressure on him. Last season, Young began trending in the right direction for the first time. Now, the question is whether he can further deliver on that promise, guiding the Panthers to a better offensive season.

RUN DEFENSE

The Panthers' run defense was inconsistent but serviceable in 2025, allowing 123.3 rushing yards per game, which was 20th in the NFL. There were standout performances—including holding the Dolphins to 19 yards and the Cowboys to 31—but Carolina struggled against elite rushing attacks like the Seahawks and Rams. Still, it marked clear progress from 2024, when the Panthers fielded the league's worst run defense. A major factor in that improvement for Ejero Evero's unit was Derrick Brown's return to full health. After appearing in just one game in 2024, the former first-round pick played the entire 2025 season, restoring much-needed strength and stability to the defensive line.

Linebacker Christian Rozeboom is gone, signing with the division rival Buccaneers after leading the Panthers with his 122 tackles in 2025. However, the addition of former Jaguars standout Devin Lloyd should help offset that loss. Lloyd brings experience, versatility and playmaking ability to the middle of the defense—his presence should lead to the Panthers, at worst, having around a league-average run defense again in 2026.

Carolina is far removed from having a historically bad run defense in 2024, as improvements were made in 2025. With Lloyd playing a significant role, the challenge now is turning steady improvement into consistent impact.

PASS DEFENSE

There's a reason the Panthers were willing to commit $120 million to Jaelan Phillips in free agency. Despite its overall improvement in 2025, Carolina managed just 30 sacks—the third-fewest in the NFL—and has lacked a true difference-maker off the edge since Brian Burns' departure in 2024. Phillips may not quite be among the league's elite pass rushers, but he does bring a level of consistency and disruption this defense has been missing. The need for pass-rushing help was apparent: Safety Tre'von Moehrig finished tied for second on the team with just three sacks. Derrick Brown and Nic Scourton had solid years, but both are better suited as complementary rushers. Adding Phillips and Lloyd gives the defense two proven pieces who should help generate more consistent pressure in 2026.

Behind that front, Carolina's secondary remains a major strength. Jaycee Horn and Mike Jackson form one of the more reliable cornerback duos in the league; with Horn locking down top receivers, Jackson was frequently targeted in 2025 but held his own, totaling 19 passes defended and four interceptions. The safety group is also steady. Moehrig contributed 103 tackles and solid coverage, while Nick Scott delivered one of his more productive seasons at age 30. Considering the lackluster pass rush, Carolina's overall pass defense held up well. With Phillips now in the fold, the Panthers should be better equipped to pressure quarterbacks, which could easily elevate the entire unit. Given the resources invested this offseason, Carolina has more of a reason to expect meaningful defensive improvement in 2026.

Ryan Fitzgerald

SPECIAL TEAMS

Kicker Ryan Fitzgerald was steady for the Panthers in his rookie season, including executing several go-ahead kicks. Carolina did, however, contribute to strong kickoff coverage, helping Carolina finish with the sixth-lowest touchback rate in the NFL. Heading into 2026, the Panthers' special teams is solid but unspectacular, much like the rest of the roster.

BOTTOM LINE

The Panthers' underlying numbers didn't scream "playoff team" in 2025, but they made it anyway. That makes 2026 a pivotal year for the franchise. Progress would validate the defensive additions and signal Young is becoming more than a middling starter, while regression could put pressure on both Young and Canales. Carolina projects as a middle-of-the-pack team in 2026—unlikely to contend for a championship, but also not a bottom-tier team. Still, there is a realistic path to NFC South contention or a wild-card push.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Dave Canales
First season with Panthers: 2024
Regular-season record with Panthers: 13–21 (38.2%)
Offensive coordinator: Brad Idzik
Defensive coordinator: Ejiro Evero
Special teams coordinator: Tracy Smith

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Offensive specialist: Darrell Bevell
Pass game coordinator: Mike Bercovici
Quarterbacks: Will Harriger
Run game coordinator: Harold Goodwin
Running backs: Bernie Parmalee
Wide receivers: Rob Moore
Tight ends: Pat McPherson
Offensive line: Joe Gilbert
Offensive assistant: Keyshawn Colmon

DEFENSE

Defensive passing game coordinator: Jonathan Cooley
Defensive line: Todd Wash
Linebackers: Peter Hansen
Outside linebackers: A.C. Carter
Assistant linebackers coach: Mayur Chaudhari
Secondary: Renaldo Hill
Defensive assistant: Kevin Peterson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	8–10	44.4%	3–3	5–4	3–6
2024–25	5–12	29.4%	2–4	2–6	2–6
2023–24	2–15	11.8%	1–5	2–6	0–9
2022–23	7–10	41.2%	4–2	5–4	2–6
2021–22	5–12	29.4%	2–4	2–6	3–6
2020–21	5–11	31.3%	1–5	2–6	3–5
2019–20	5–11	31.3%	1–5	2–6	2–5
2018–19	7–9	43.8%	2–4	5–3	2–6
2017–18	11–6	64.7%	3–4	6–2	5–4
2016–17	6–10	37.5%	1–5	4–4	2–6
2015–16	17–2	89.5%	5–1	10–0	7–1
2014–15	8–9–1	47.1%	4–2	5–4	3–5–1
2013–14	12–5	70.6%	5–1	7–2	5–3
2012–13	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4
2011–12	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2010–11	2–14	12.5%	0–6	2–6	0–8
2009–10	8–8	50.0%	4–2	5–3	3–5
2008–09	12–5	70.6%	4–2	8–1	4–4
2007–08	7–9	43.8%	3–3	2–6	5–3
2006–07	8–8	50.0%	5–1	4–4	4–4

New Orleans Saints

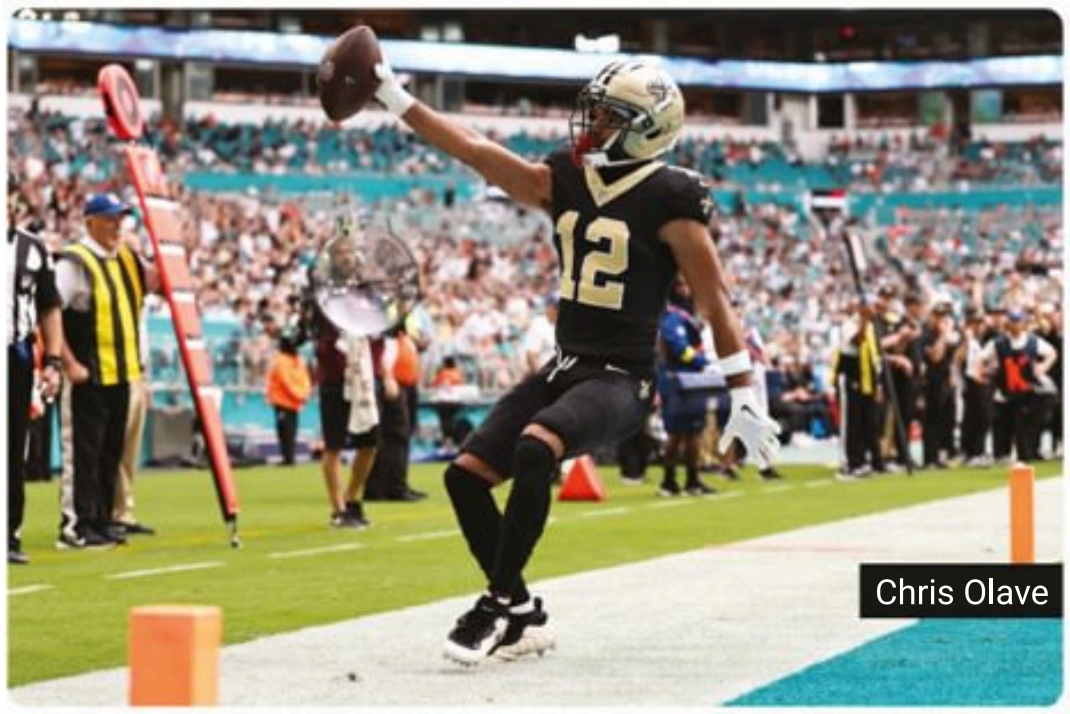
Erik McCoy

The Saints entered 2025 as one of the top contenders for the No. 1 overall pick and played like it for much of the season. By December, New Orleans looked like a totally different team, even while dealing with a significant number of injuries. Second-year head coach Kellen Moore is hoping that momentum carries over into 2026. The success the Saints found late in the season started at the quarterback position. Tyler Shough looked more than capable of being a quality NFL starter, even with limited weapons around him. Already nearing 27 years old, it's tough to say how much more room for improvement Shough might have, but for the time being, the quarterback isn't a question in New Orleans.

Offseason additions Travis Etienne, Kaden Elliss, David Edwards and rookie Jordyn Tyson help fill out a roster that has promise. But do the Saints have enough firepower to contend in the NFC South? The division doesn't have a superpower, but the Buccaneers are anticipating a healthier season, the Falcons are under new leadership and the Panthers are hoping to avoid regression after a surprise division title.

RUNNING GAME

After nine years with Alvin Kamara leading the backfield, the Saints made it clear with their signing of Etienne that it's time for a changing of the guard. Etienne, a local product, joins New Orleans fresh off a bounce-back season in which he racked up 1,399 scrimmage yards and averaged 4.3 yards per carry in an improved Jaguars offense. Etienne's durability is a plus, as he's missed only two games since an injury kept him off the field as a rookie, but he will have to prove his improved efficiency in 2025 wasn't a mirage. Etienne averaged less than four yards per carry in both 2023 and 2024,


Chris Olave

by Dan Treacy

and his longest run out of 150 attempts in 2024 was only 22 yards.

The positive news for Etienne and the Saints is that the offensive line should be improved, particularly on the interior. Center Erik McCoy is hoping for a healthy season after missing 10 games in each of the last two seasons, while guard David Edwards can be a high-impact addition after a strong stint in Buffalo. Health is everything, but the Saints should have one of their stronger offensive lines in recent memory. Finding that change-of-pace back behind Etienne will be one of the storylines of training camp. Kendre Miller held down that role before tearing his ACL in 2025, but Devin Neal and Audric Estime saw time after Miller went down and held their own. Because Miller wasn't drafted by the current regime, he could be fighting for a roster spot.

The Saints were a more pass-heavy team in 2025 than they were before Moore arrived. Some of that had to do with the number of deficits they faced over the first three months of the season, but their rushing attack also ranked 31st in yards per carry (3.7). With what should be a more efficient running game and potentially more competitive games on tap, it wouldn't be a surprise to see that balance restored a bit. With Etienne making $13 million a year, he wasn't brought in to take a back seat or split carries. The Saints are looking for Etienne to be a workhorse, at least for the time being, and he will look to take some of the pressure off Shough in the quarterback's first full season as a starter.

PASSING GAME

Have the Saints found a quarterback? There was some concern about how high Shough's ceiling would be given his age, but he went from not even beating out Spencer Rattler in training camp to playing like a solid NFL starter by the end of his rookie season. How much he can elevate the offense is crucial for the Saints' chances of making a leap in 2026. Shough didn't always light up the box score when the Saints were winning late in the season, but he averaged 260 passing yards per game over his final eight starts in a situation that just wasn't all that favorable. New Orleans dealt with significant injuries to its offensive weapons down the stretch, and Shough didn't have an efficient running game to help balance out the offense. The Saints believe the supporting cast surrounding Shough is better this season.

The Saints addressed their lack of high-level receiving weapons in the draft, taking three wide receivers and a tight end including Tyson with the eighth overall pick. His speed and big-play ability makes Tyson the perfect complement to Chris Olave, who is coming off a breakout year, setting career highs with 100 receptions, 1,163 yards and nine touchdowns while playing in 16 games. Fourth-round pick Bryce Lance out of North Dakota State is a sneaky prospect should his 4.34 40-time translate from the FCS to the NFL. Prior to the draft, depth at wide receiver beyond Olave had been dangerously thin for the Saints. Whether it's Bub Means, Devaughn Vele or Kevin Austin Jr., it's hard to find another receiver Shough can trust to handle a high-volume role. Tight

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Detroit Lions	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Baltimore Ravens	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	4:25 p.m.
4	Oct. 5	ATLANTA FALCONS	8:15 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	MINNESOTA VIKINGS	1:00 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at New York Giants	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	vs. Pittsburgh Steelers (in Paris)	9:30 a.m.
8		BYE WEEK	
9	Nov. 8	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	CAROLINA PANTHERS	1:00 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Chicago Bears	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	at Cincinnati Bengals	1:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	GREEN BAY PACKERS	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Carolina Panthers	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	1:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	ARIZONA CARDINALS	1:00 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	at Atlanta Falcons	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

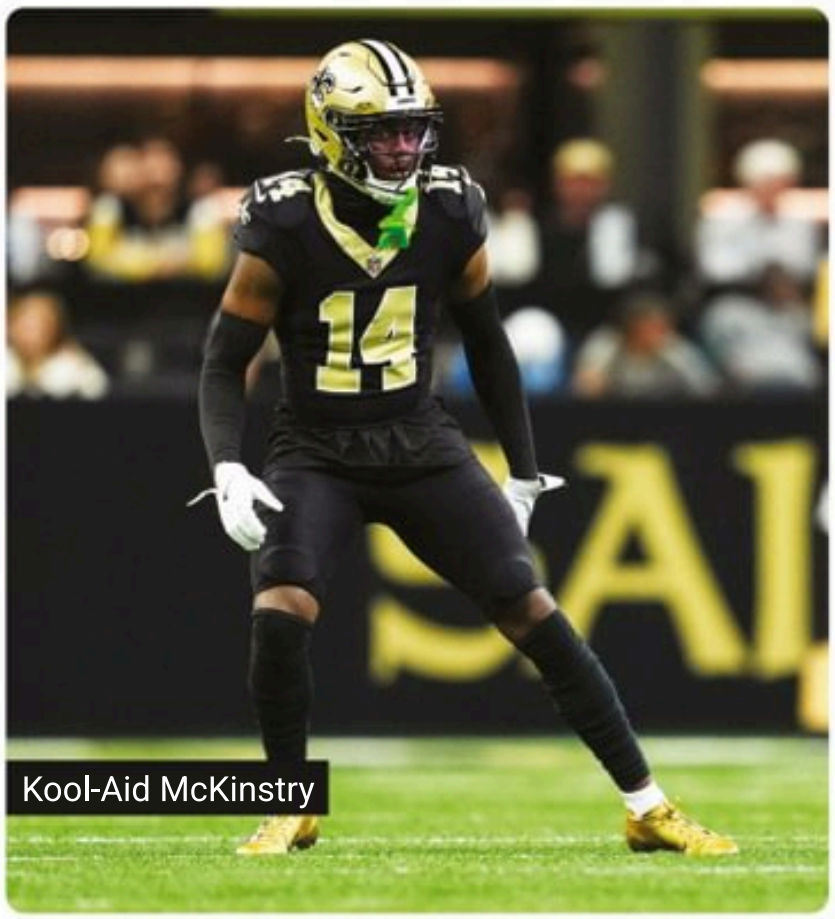
Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Tyler Shough	Spencer Rattler
RB	Travis Etienne Jr.	Alvin Kamara
WR	Chris Olave	Mason Tipton
WR	Jordyn Tyson	Bub Means
WR	Devaughn Vele	Bryce Lance
TE	Juwan Johnson	Noah Fant
LT	Kelvin Banks Jr.	-
LG	David Edwards	Dillon Radunz
C	Erik McCoy	-
RG	Cesar Ruiz	Jeremiah Wright
RT	Taliese Fuaga	Asim Richards

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Vernon Broughton	Tyree Wilson
NT	Davon Godchaux	Christen Miller
RDE	Bryan Bresee	John Ridgeway III
WLB	Carl Granderson	Anfernee Jennings
LILB	Kaden Elliss	Isaiah Stalbird
RILB	Pete Werner	Danny Stutsman
SLB	Chase Young	Fadil Diggs
LCB	Kool-Aid McKinstry	TJ Hall
SS	Justin Reid	-
FS	Julian Blackmon	Jonas Sanker
RCB	Quincy Riley	Isaac Yiadom

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Charlie Smyth	Ryan Wright


Kool-Aid McKinstry

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	8	WR	Jordyn Tyson
2	42	DT	Christen Miller
3	73	TE	Oscar Delp
4	132	G	Jeremiah Wright
4	136	WR	Bryce Lance

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	9	OT	Kelvin Banks Jr.
2	40	QB	Tyler Shough
3	71	DT	Vernon Broughton
3	93	S	Jonas Sanker
4	112	LB	Danny Stutsman

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	14	OL	Taliese Fuaga
2	41	CB	Kool-Aid McKinstry
5	150	QB	Spencer Rattler
5	170	WR	Bub Means
5	175	LB	Jaylan Ford

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	29	DL	Bryan Bresee
2	40	EDGE	Isaiah Foskey
3	71	RB	Kendre Miller
4	103	OL	Nick Saldiveri
4	127	QB	Jake Haener

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	11	WR	Chris Olave
1	19	OT	Trevor Penning
2	49	CB	Alontae Taylor
5	161	LB	D'Marco Jackson
6	194	DT	Jordan Jackson

end Juwan Johnson should again play a major role as a pass-catcher. Johnson was quietly one of the NFL's most productive tight ends in 2025, racking up 889 yards on a whopping 102 targets and proving he can adapt to a new offense.

The fact Shough was able to do so much with so little last season speaks highly of Moore's scheme. Moore seemed to get more comfortable as his first season as a head coach went on, and the arrow is pointing in the right direction as he heads into year two. The Saints' passing game may be missing what it needs to jump to that next level, but regression shouldn't be an expectation, either. Upgrades elsewhere should benefit Shough. The Saints' running game simply can't be much more inefficient than it was last season, and the offensive line should come together better this year. Shough has never started a game with Erik McCoy at the center position, so McCoy's return could be a major boost while the addition of David Edwards helps to shore up the interior some more.

Both tackle spots are X-factors. LT Kelvin Banks Jr. put together a solid rookie season. A second-year leap would be a massive bonus for Shough, while Taliese Fuaga should continue progressing at right tackle as he enters his third season. With more weapons (albeit, many unproven), Shough has a fighting chance to prove he is the quarterback of the future in New Orleans. He's proven he can hold his own in Moore's system even when the circumstances aren't ideal. Whether Shough can make another leap and elevate the Saints into NFC South contention is a different question.

RUN DEFENSE

The Saints finished 19th in rushing yards allowed last season, but their mark of allowing only 4.0 yards per carry was sixth-best in the NFL. Teams ran the ball often against New Orleans after jumping out to early leads, skewing the numbers a bit. The Saints are hoping to force teams to balance it out a bit more this season. The biggest change to the defense is the departure of Demario Davis, who spent eight years as an on- and off-field leader for the unit. Elliss was brought over from Atlanta to help fill the void, giving the Saints a talented linebacker who can get to the quarterback and play well in coverage. Run defense was not a strength for Elliss in 2025, so it could be an adjustment for this defense without Davis. LB Pete Werner battled inconsistency last season but was at his strongest as a run defender.

Up front, it's primarily the same personnel with Bryan Bresee, Davon Godchaux and Nathan Shepherd all returning. The tone-setter, however, is veteran Cameron Jordan, who remained unsigned in May but says he's interested in returning for a 16th season. The Saints bolstered the interior with their second-round pick, drafting Georgia's Christen Miller who has potential as a run-stopping interior anchor.

PASS DEFENSE

The Saints finished fourth in the NFL in passing yards allowed per game in 2025 with less than 180. While some of that may have to do with teams building up early leads and running the ball late in games, New Orleans' mark of 5.7 yards allowed per pass attempt still ranked 11th. The secondary

lost Alontae Taylor, which is a significant hit after his strong play the last two seasons. Fortunately, Kool-Aid McKinstry took the leap the Saints were hoping to see in 2025. New Orleans will ask him to continue progressing into a No. 1 cornerback with Taylor gone, but the bigger question is who will step up beside him. Quincy Riley saw significant playing time as a rookie, while journeyman Isaac Yiadom could be in line for a larger role. At safety, Jonas Sanker was a nice surprise as a rookie and is looking to take another step next to veteran Justin Reid.

New Orleans showed a surprising ability to get to the quarterback in 2025. Even if Jordan returns, a double-digit sack season might be unlikely. But the Saints are hoping they have finally unlocked former No. 2 pick Chase Young after a resurgent year.Carl Granderson can chip in and generate pressure, while Bresee wasn't as impactful from a pass-rushing standpoint in 2025 but had 7.5 sacks in 2024.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The kicker role is a question heading into the season. Northern Ireland's Charlie Smyth took the job down the stretch in 2025 and held his own, drilling 4-of-6 field goals from at least 50 yards out and 12-of-16 overall, but he doesn't have much of a track record and could be on a short leash in 2026. The Saints also brought in a new punter in former Viking Ryan Wright in what they anticipate will be an upgrade after trading Kai Kroeger to the Texans.

BOTTOM LINE

Even with six wins, the Saints can call last season a success. They clearly improved as the year went on, and they have a quarterback they believe in after Shough finished strong. A division without an elite team opens up a path to contention, but there are still questions to be answered. Does the offense have enough weapons to make that kind of leap? Will the defense play well again after losing two key starters? The arrow appears to be pointing up again in New Orleans, but a journey all the way back to the top could require some more help.

Chase Young

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Kellen Moore
First season with Saints: 2025
Regular-season record with Saints: 6–11 (35.3%)
Offensive coordinator: Doug Nussmeier
Defensive coordinator: Brandon Staley
Special teams coordinator: Phil Galiano

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Run game coordinator: T.J. Paganetti
Quarterbacks: Scott Tolzien
Running backs: Joel Thomas
Wide receivers: Keith Williams
Assistant wide receivers: Kyle Valero
Tight ends: Chase Haslett
Offensive line: Brendan Nugent
Senior offensive assistant: Scott Linehan
Offensive assistants: Will Clapp / Tobijah Hughley

DEFENSE

Defensive pass game coordinator: Terry Joseph
Defensive line: Bo Davis
Assistant defensive line: Brian Young
Edges: Jay Rodgers
Linebackers: Peter Sirmon
Assistant linebackers: Adam Gristick
Cornerbacks: Grady Brown
Assistant defensive backs: Robert Blanton
Senior defensive assistant: Peter Giunta

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	6–11	35.3%	3–3	3–5	3–6
2024–25	5–12	29.4%	2–4	3–6	2–6
2023–24	9–8	52.9%	4–2	5–3	4–5
2022–23	7–10	41.2%	2–4	4–4	3–5
2021–22	9–8	52.9%	4–2	2–5	6–3
2020–21	13–5	72.2%	6–1	7–3	6–2
2019–20	13–4	76.5%	5–1	6–3	7–1
2018–19	14–4	77.8%	4–2	7–3	7–1
2017–18	12–6	66.7%	5–2	8–1	3–5
2016–17	7–9	43.8%	2–4	4–4	3–5
2015–16	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2014–15	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4
2013–14	12–6	66.7%	5–1	8–0	4–6
2012–13	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2011–12	14–4	77.8%	5–1	9–0	5–4
2010–11	11–6	64.7%	4–2	5–3	6–3
2009–10	16–3	84.2%	4–2	8–2	7–1
2008–09	8–8	50.0%	2–4	5–2	2–6
2007–08	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4
2006–07	11–7	61.1%	4–2	5–4	6–3

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

The Buccaneers were a feel-good story in the two years that followed Tom Brady's retirement, but it's hard not to feel like the pressure has been turned up for the first time in the Baker Mayfield era after a disappointing 2025. Injuries certainly contributed to a difficult season, but a 1-7 record between November and December fell below even the lowest of expectations for a Tampa Bay team that had won the NFC South in each of the four previous seasons.

The evolution of the NFC South might not make the path any easier for Tampa Bay, as the Falcons have new leadership and the Saints proved late last season that they might be closer to contention than previously thought. The Panthers, meanwhile, are reigning division champions and proved to be a formidable opponent for the Buccaneers in 2025. With franchise icons Mike Evans and Lavonte David gone, plus coach Todd Bowles on the hot seat, 2026 will be a bit of a reset for the Buccaneers. To avoid an even bigger reset, Mayfield is under pressure to return to form and the defense needs to shape up after regressing last season.

RUNNING GAME

The Buccaneers' offense still runs through Mayfield, but what was missing most in 2025 was a consistent running game. With Bucky Irving healthy and a new offensive coordinator in Zac Robinson, Tampa is hoping for a more balanced look in 2026. Irving missed seven games with foot and shoulder injuries in 2025, but the issue wasn't so much the missed time as it was his lack of effectiveness once he returned. After an efficient rookie season both as a pass-catching back and on the ground, Irving averaged only 3.4 yards per carry. After offseason shoulder surgery,

Baker Mayfield

the Buccaneers still need to make sure Irving is fully ready to take on the heavier workload he handled as a rookie.

The Buccaneers added Kenneth Gainwell as a change-of-pace back, giving Robinson two pass-catching backs. Gainwell averaged 4.7 yards per carry in 2025 and was actually the Steelers' second-leading receiver, so Tampa Bay feels more confident in its ability to survive any missed time from Irving after losing Rachaad White to the Commanders. Only one offensive lineman played more than 70 percent of snaps for Tampa Bay in 2025: Graham Barton.

The Buccaneers are banking on a healthier line setting the table for more efficient rushing attack, and the arrival of Robinson as offensive coordinator should be a welcomed sight. Robinson has a passing game background, but Bijan Robinson averaged more than 2,000 scrimmage yards in his two seasons at the helm of the Falcons' offense. Irving doesn't need to post that kind of production for the Buccaneers' offense to improve, but he should be in better hands than he was in 2025. With Evans out of the mix and Mayfield settling in under yet another new offensive playcaller, it will be critical for the Buccaneers' rushing attack to set the tone early in the season.

PASSING GAME

Mayfield posted the lowest passer rating of his three seasons in Tampa Bay last season, and it might be fair to cast some blame toward him considering the Buccaneers couldn't win a weak NFC South. The situation around him mattered, too, though. Evans, Chris Godwin and Jalen McMillan missed a combined 30 games, and injuries to four of five starters on the offensive line as well as Irving didn't help. With Irving severely limited once he returned, the pressure was on Mayfield to put the offense on his back. Whether he's the type of quarterback to do that successfully, the situation should be better in 2026.

With Evans out of the picture, the pressure will be on second-year WR Emeka Egbuka to step up. The Buccaneers' hope is Godwin and McMillan stay healthy, which should allow for a pretty talented

Bucky Irving

by Dan Treacy

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Cincinnati Bengals	1:00 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	CLEVELAND BROWNS	1:00 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	MINNESOTA VIKINGS	4:05 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	GREEN BAY PACKERS	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 8	at Dallas Cowboys	8:15 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	PITTSBURGH STEELERS	1:00 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Carolina Panthers	1:00 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	ATLANTA FALCONS	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at Chicago Bears	8:20 p.m.
10		BYE WEEK	
11	Nov. 22	at Detroit Lions	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 30	CAROLINA PANTHERS	8:15 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at Baltimore Ravens	1:00 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	1:00 p.m.
16	TBD	at Atlanta Falcons	TBD
17	TBD	LOS ANGELES RAMS	TBD
18	TBD	at New Orleans Saints	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Baker Mayfield	Jake Browning
RB	Bucky Irving	Kenneth Gainwell
WR	Chris Godwin Jr.	Ted Hurst
WR	Emeka Egbuka	Tez Johnson
WR	Jalen McMillan	David Sills V
TE	Cade Otton	Payne Durham
LT	Tristan Wirfs	Justin Skule
LG	Ben Bredeson	Elijah Klein
C	Graham Barton	Ben Scott
RG	Cody Mauch	Dan Feeney
RT	Luke Goedeke	-

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Elijah Roberts	Calijah Kancey
NT	Vita Vea	Elijah Simmons
RDE	A'Shawn Robinson	Rakeem Nunez-Roches
WLB	Rueben Bain Jr.	Anthony Nelson
LILB	Alex Anzalone	Josiah Trotter
RILB	Christian Rozeboom	SirVocea Dennis
SLB	Yaya Diaby	Al-Quadin Muhammad
LCB	Zyon McCollum	-
SS	Tykee Smith	Miles Killebrew
FS	Antoine Winfield Jr.	Rashad Wisdom
RCB	Benjamin Morrison	Josh Hayes

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Chase McLaughlin	Riley Dixon

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	15	DE	Rueben Bain Jr.
2	46	LB	Josiah Trotter
3	84	WR	Ted Hurst
4	116	CB	Keionte Scott
5	155	DT	DeMonte Capehart

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	19	WR	Emeka Egbuka
2	53	CB	Benjamin Morrison
3	84	CB	Jacob Parrish
4	121	LB	David Walker
5	157	DE	Elijah Roberts

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	26	OL	Graham Barton
2	57	EDGE	Chris Braswell
3	89	S	Tykee Smith
3	92	WR	Jalen McMillan
4	125	RB	Bucky Irving

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	19	DT	Calijah Kancey
2	48	G	Cody Mauch
3	82	EDGE	YaYa Diaby
5	153	LB	SirVocea Dennis
5	171	TE	Payne Durham

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	33	DE	Logan Hall
2	57	OT	Luke Goedeke
3	91	RB	Rachaad White
4	106	TE	Cade Otton
4	133	P	Jake Camarda

Yaya Diaby

receiving corps without a major drop-off after Evans' exit, but recent history says that's far from a guarantee. As insurance, the Bucs also used a third-round pick on 6-foot-4 WR Ted Hurst out of Georgia State who clocked a 4.4 in the 40-yard dash at the combine. Egbuka looked like a legitimate No. 1 receiver before hitting a wall about midway through his rookie season. With a full offseason under his belt and the right conditioning, his talent and football IQ should allow him to take that next step. The Buccaneers also brought back tight end Cade Otton, who mostly handles short passes but is a reliable safety blanket for Mayfield.

McMillan feels like the X-factor of the offense. The former third-round pick scored eight touchdowns as a rookie despite not holding down a regular role until the second half of the season, but a preseason injury in 2025 kept him off the field until December. After producing a 114-yard game against the Dolphins in Week 17, McMillan should be in position to step up and help fill the void left by Evans.

With a defensive-minded head coach in Bowles, the offensive coordinator role is critical to the Buccaneers' success year-to-year. After big seasons for the passing game under Dave Canales and Liam Coen, the same success couldn't be found under Josh Grizzard. Mayfield has a bit of familiarity with Robinson from their brief overlap with the Rams, which should help, but it will be worth watching how quickly the offense comes together early in the season.

The offensive line matters just as much. After four of five spots on the line were ravaged by injury in 2025, the Buccaneers can enter 2026 with virtually the same group that helped Mayfield throw 41 touchdown passes in 2024. A healthy Tristan Wirfs is one of the best tackles in the league, and Luke Goedeke can shore up the other end after missing six games last season. Guards Cody Mauch and Ben Bredeson took a step back in 2025, but healthier seasons and a new scheme have a chance to get their level of play back to where it needs to be.

A healthier line, along with a healthier Irving, should also pave the way for a more effective running game. That would take some of the pressure off Mayfield and make the offense less predictable than it was by the end of last season. Quarterbacks matter more than anyone else, and Mayfield is what he is: a quality starter who will put his body on the line and can win in the right situation. The Buccaneers know what they have in him. If his supporting cast can stay healthier than it did last season, Mayfield has a chance to get close to his output from 2024.

RUN DEFENSE

The Buccaneers' defense took a step back in 2025, but the run defense still held its own while the secondary flailed. Tampa Bay was one of five teams to allow less than 100 rushing yards per game, while its 4.3 yards allowed per carry mark ranked 14th in the NFL. Vita Vea still sets the tone up front for this defense, serving as a valuable run-stuffer who knows the scheme inside and out, but the Buccaneers are looking to benefit from the full-time return of Calijah Kancey after he missed nearly all of 2025. Kancey showed an ability to get to the quarterback in 2024, but he hasn't been as consistent of a run defender as Tampa Bay hoped. The Buccaneers also added veteran run stuffer A'Shawn Robinson in free agency.

The biggest change to the Buccaneers' defense comes right in the middle, where Lavonte David retired after 14 seasons with the organization. Losing a locker room leader like David is a hit, but it's possible the on-the-field ramifications are positive after he showed his age a bit in 2025. Former Lions starter Alex Anzalone will fill the void after signing a two-year deal. The Bucs also drafted All-SEC linebacker Josiah Trotter out of Missouri. Trotter, the son of former Eagles Pro Bowler Jeremiah Trotter, projects as a downhill, physical run defender.

PASS DEFENSE

The Buccaneers struggled against the pass in 2025, and it's still an area of concern entering 2026. Tampa Bay finished just below the league average in sacks last season, with YaYa Diaby the only player to record more than five. Enter rookie Rueben Bain Jr. out of Miami who the Bucs drafted with the 15th overall pick. Alongside free-agent signing Al-Quadin

Muhammad—who had 11 sacks last season with the Lions—Bain figures to play a critical role on the edge in Year 1. The interior defensive line can at least chip in and get to the quarterback on occasion. The return of Kancey should help matters, as he had 7.5 sacks in 2024, and Vea has shown an ability to generate pressure as well.

Vita Vea

The secondary will need to make up for the loss of longtime starting cornerback Jamel Dean, who signed with the Steelers. Second-year DBs Benjamin Morrison and Jacob Parrish along with fourth-round pick Keionte Scott are three promising young pieces who can help fill the void next to Zyon McCollum, but the cornerback room didn't receive any major upgrade in free agency despite coming off a rocky season. Pro-Bowl safety Antoine Winfield Jr. stayed healthy last season after an injury-riddled 2024, which was a positive development in an otherwise disappointing year for the Buccaneers. If he can get back to his All-Pro form from 2023, the outlook for Tampa Bay's secondary would be much brighter.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Chase McLaughlin posted the lowest field goal percentage of his time in Tampa Bay last season, but don't let that fool you. He has become a weapon from long range, drilling 11-of-12 attempts from at least 50 yards. A handful of shorter-range misses hurt, but McLaughlin's track record indicates that won't be the norm. Riley Dixon finished near the bottom of the NFL in yards per punt last season, but he pinned opponents inside the 20-yard line at the highest rate of his career.

BOTTOM LINE

The Buccaneers found out in 2025 that simply relying on the rest of the NFC South to fall on its face isn't enough anymore. The division still isn't great, but it's good enough that Tampa Bay will be tested. While defensive concerns still exist and the offense will have to grapple with the loss of Evans, there is reason to believe some better luck on the injury front can really move the needle for the Buccaneers. Mayfield has proven he can win under the right circumstances, and those circumstances should be better in 2026 with a healthier running game and offensive line.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Todd Bowles
First season with Buccaneers: 2022
Regular-season record with Buccaneers: 35–33 (51.5%)
Offensive coordinator: Zac Robinson
No defensive coordinator
Special teams coordinator: Danny Smith

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Pass game coordinator: T.J. Yates
Quarterbacks: Chandler Whitmer
Running backs: Skip Peete
Wide receivers: Bryan McClendon
Tight ends: Justin Peelle
Assistant tight ends: Jeff Kastl
Run game coordinator/offensive line: Kevin Carberry
Assistant offensive line: Andrew Mitchell
Pass game specialist: Ken Zampese

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Marcus West
Run game coordinator/outside linebackers: Larry Foote
Inside linebackers: Mike Caldwell
Cornerbacks: Rashad Johnson
Safeties: Tim Atkins
Defensive assistant: Todd Bowles Jr.
Defensive quality control: Joey Fitzgerald

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	8–9	47.1%	3–3	4–4	4–5
2024–25	10–8	55.6%	4–2	5–5	5–3
2023–24	10–9	52.6%	4–2	5–4	5–5
2022–23	8–10	44.4%	4–2	4–5	3–5
2021–22	14–5	73.7%	4–2	8–2	6–3
2020–21	15–5	75.0%	5–2	6–3	9–2
2019–20	7–9	43.8%	2–4	2–5	5–3
2018–19	5–11	31.3%	2–4	4–4	1–7
2017–18	5–11	31.3%	1–5	4–4	1–7
2016–17	9–7	56.3%	4–2	4–4	5–3
2015–16	6–10	37.5%	3–3	3–5	3–5
2014–15	2–14	12.5%	0–6	0–8	2–6
2013–14	4–12	25.0%	1–5	3–5	1–7
2012–13	7–9	43.8%	3–3	3–5	4–4
2011–12	4–12	25.0%	2–4	3–5	1–7
2010–11	10–6	62.5%	3–3	4–4	6–2
2009–10	3–13	18.8%	1–5	1–7	2–6
2008–09	9–7	56.3%	3–3	6–2	3–5
2007–08	9–8	52.9%	5–1	6–3	3–5
2006–07	4–12	25.0%	0–6	3–5	1–7

Marvin Harrison Jr.

Arizona Cardinals

The Cardinals were a last-place team in 2025, going 3-14. In the tough NFC West, which had three playoff teams, that put Arizona nine games behind Los Angeles and San Francisco, and 11 games back of Super Bowl LX champion Seattle. There was no reprieve for former coach Jonathan Gannon for playing in such a top-heavy division. After three seasons with no playoff trips, the Cardinals fired him and replaced him with Mike LaFleur, the former offensive coordinator of the division rival Rams. LaFleur, only 39, has his work cut out for him to turn around his new team. The Rams' Sean McVay and the 49ers' Kyle Shanahan are long-tenured coaches of perennial NFC title contenders. Mike Macdonald didn't take long to lead the Seahawks to a ring.

The Cardinals are turning the page from quarterback Kyler Murray, their No. 1 overall pick in 2019. With Murray having been released, Arizona now has a depth chart of Jacoby Brissett, Gardner Minshew and third-round draft pick Carson Beck. Brissett filled in well for an injured Murray in the old offense, but he now is operating for LaFleur and new offensive coordinator Nathaniel Hackett.

Gannon did leave some positive vibes for the defense, prompting LaFleur to stick with Nick Rallis, the coordinator on that side of the ball. Restricted by needing to move on from Murray's contract, the Cardinals had limited resources for veteran upgrades. On offense, wide receiver, the line and running back were addressed. On defense, most of the key personnel is intact for Rallis, which also makes the overall transition less bumpy. There will be a lot more lumps for the Cardinals ahead, however, as they try to start over in trying to catch the rest of the division:

RUNNING GAME

The Cardinals' rushing attack fell apart with both James Conner and Trey Benson suffering season-ending injuries. As they worked to find a competent committee, they finished with the league's No. 31 rushing attack, averaging only 93.1 yards per game. Not having Murray to add some production hurt, and there was no consistent solution between Emari Demercado, Michael Carter and Bam Knight. So perhaps it's no surprise that the Cardinals used the draft's No. 3 overall pick on Jeremiyah Love out of Notre Dame. It's a high price for a running back, but Love is an elite athlete, giving the Cardinals a chance for explosive plays on the ground and through catches out of the backfield.

Before selecting Love, the Cardinals reworked Conner's contract, and they also signed former Falcons backup Tyler Allgeier. The team now has a chance to mix-and-match running backs in a variety of situations. But make no mistake, Love is expected to be a dynamic workhorse back. The Cardinals can feel confidence rising in the run blocking of left tackle Paris Johnson Jr., now paired with stout former Steelers guard Isaac Seumalo. The other newcomer, former Falcons right tackle Elijah Wilkinson, is familiar to Allgeier. Center Hjalte Froholdt returns to anchor the line, and rookie Chase Bisontis will compete for the right guard spot with Isaiah Adams.

Arizona needs to change its pass-happy ways under former coordinator Drew Petzing, who's now with the Lions. That was more out of necessity, with Brissett throwing for massive volume with the team often trailing in the second half. No team called for pass plays more frequently than the Cardinals (66 percent). The Cardinals need to restore some sense of balance. Just in 2024, they ran 44 percent of the time, with Conner and Murray being the 1-2 punch. The Cardinals had the weapons to be productive when throwing often, but they turned into a one-dimensional team. Drafting Love, bringing in Allgeier and reworking the offensive line should change that and take more pressure off the passing game.

PASSING GAME

Brissett goes into the season with a short-term hold on the starting job. He led the No. 7 passing attack last season, averaging 232.6 yards per game. As expected based on the frequency, the Cardinals led the NFL with 649 attempts, or an average of more than 38 per game. Cardinals QBs were also sacked 59 times, putting the dropback count well above 700. In relation to those attempts, the Cardinals finished only No. 22 with 6.7 yards per. In contrast, the Patriots were at 8.9 yards per attempt with 502 attempts and the Seahawks were at 8.4 yards per attempt with only 481 attempts. That's a large gap in efficiency between the Cardinals and the two Super Bowl teams. Arizona was in the middle of the pack with 49 pass plays of 20 or more yards.

Brissett connected best with tight end Trey McBride, who led the team with 126 catches for 1,239 receiving yards and 11 TDs, but he averaged only 9.8 yards per catch. His second-most reliable receiver was wideout Michael Wilson, who broke out with 78 catches for 1,006 yards and seven TDs, often filling in for Marvin Harrison Jr. as the top outside target. Unlocking Harrison, who averaged 14.8 yards per catch, is key in the new offense. The team signed Kendrick Bourne, which means Wilson is set to adjust to more time in the slot. They also added some speed in Devin Duvernay, who will be a much bigger asset in the return game, along with rookie Reggie Virgil.

Harrison needs to deliver as the field stretcher and work on better chemistry with Brissett. With LaFleur coming over from the Rams to lead the team, there might be hopes of Harrison breaking out and joining Wilson to give the Cardinals a little of what Los Angeles has in its top two receivers. McBride will remain the go-to guy on short-to-intermediate routes. LaFleur will try to keep the receiver corps streamlined, focused on three targets, as that was the comfort level for Brissett in the previous offense. McBride, Wilson and Harrison accounted

by Vinnie Iyer

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 13	at Los Angeles Chargers	4:25 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	4:25 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at San Francisco 49ers	4:05 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at New York Giants	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	DETROIT LIONS	4:25 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	at Los Angeles Rams	4:05 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	DENVER BRONCOS	4:05 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	at Dallas Cowboys	1:00 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at Seattle Seahawks	4:25 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	LOS ANGELES RAMS	4:05 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	at Kansas City Chiefs	1:00 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	4:25 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	PHILADELPHIA EAGLES	4:05 p.m.
14		BYE WEEK	
15	Dec. 20	NEW YORK JETS	4:05 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	at New Orleans Saints	1:00 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	4:05 p.m.
18	TBD	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	TBD

Jacoby Brissett

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Jacoby Brissett	Gardner Minshew II
RB	Jeremiyah Love	Tyler Allgeier
WR	Marvin Harrison Jr.	Xavier Weaver
WR	Michael Wilson	Devin Duvernay
WR	Kendrick Bourne	Reggie Virgil
TE	Trey McBride	Tip Reiman
LT	Paris Johnson Jr.	Demontrey Jacobs
LG	Isaac Seumalo	Jon Gaines II
C	Hjalte Froholdt	-
RG	Isaiah Adams	Chase Bisontis
RT	Elijah Wilkinson	Olisaemeka Udoh

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Josh Sweat	Jordan Burch
LDT	Roy Lopez	PJ Mustipher
RDT	Walter Nolen III	Andrew Billings
RDE	Darius Robinson	Dante Stills
WLB	Cody Simon	Owen Pappoe
MLB	Mack Wilson Sr.	Jack Gibbens
SLB	Zaven Collins	Baron Browning
LCB	Will Johnson	Sean Murphy-Bunting
SS	Budda Baker	Kitan Crawford
FS	Andrew Wingard	Dadrion Taylor-Demerson
RCB	Denzel Burke	Starling Thomas V

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Chad Ryland	Blake Gillikin

Zaven Collins

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	3	RB	Jeremiyah Love
2	34	G	Chase Bisontis
3	65	QB	Carson Beck
4	104	DT	Kaleb Proctor
5	143	WR	Reggie Virgil

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	16	DT	Walter Nolen
2	47	CB	Will Johnson
3	78	DE	Jordan Burch
4	115	LB	Cody Simon
5	174	CB	Denzel Burke

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	4	WR	Marvin Harrison Jr.
1	27	DL	Darius Robinson
2	43	CB	Max Melton
3	66	RB	Trey Benson
3	71	G	Isaiah Adams

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	6	OT	Paris Johnson
2	41	EDGE	BJ Ojulari
3	72	CB	Garrett Williams
3	94	WR	Michael Wilson
4	122	G	Jon Gaines

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	55	TE	Trey McBride
3	87	DE	Cameron Thomas
3	100	DE	Myjai Sanders
6	201	RB	Keaontay Ingram
6	215	G	Lecitus Smith

for 60 percent of the targets last season, with the former two getting almost half, 48 percent.

Duvernay replaces Greg Dortch as a No. 4 receiver when spreading the field and doing double duty on returns. Love provides big playmaking ability as a backfield receiver, and retaining Conner gives the team another option as a pass-catcher. Brissett, who held out of the Cardinals' voluntary offseason program, is trying to prove he should be more than a bridge QB for a second season. To do that, he must increase the execution of downfield passing for LaFleur and Hackett. The new coaching staff will understand some of the limitations post-Murray, but he also could be on a short leash. After drafting Beck, general manager Monti Ossenfort said the team was "not really naming anybody" as a starting QB.

RUN DEFENSE

The Cardinals struggled in this area, finishing No. 25 in 2025 by allowing an average of 126.9 yards per game. Rookie first-round defensive tackle Walter Nolen had issues vs. the run and must get better after making his initial mark as an inside pass rusher. New nose tackle Roy Lopez, a former Lion, helps to some degree in the nose. Arizona keeps from hemorrhaging more against the run thanks to solid play from outside linebackers Zaven Collins and Josh Sweat. Budda Baker remains one of the league's best run-support safeties.

With Rallis back to run the defense, the Cardinals will expect to get better through the growth of Nolen and Darius Robinson, their first-rounder from 2024. The Cardinals have upgraded their depth at linebacker with former Patriot Jack Gibbens, who is their best inside linebacker in run defense. The Cardinals' opponents were able to stick with the running game often while playing with leads. They averaged 29 attempts a game at a solid 4.4 yards per attempt. This deficiency kept the Arizona pass defense from being disruptive as well. This season will be a repeat without the whole group rallying better for Rallis.

PASS DEFENSE

The Cardinals had only 30 sacks last season. Sweat, reuniting with Gannon after helping the Eagles win the Super Bowl, accounted for 12.0, living up to his free-agent deal. The ageless Calais Campbell, who signed with the Ravens this offseason, was able to contribute 6.5. Two players accounted for more than 60 percent of the pressure production. Boosting the pass rush was such a draft priority, and the Cardinals hope fourth-round pick DT Kaleb Proctor, who had nine sacks his final season at Southeastern Louisiana, can help. The Cardinals have gotten limited returns from 2021 first-rounder Collins in getting to the quarterback opposite Sweat. The ideal scenario is trusting a core four and staying consistent with seven in coverage as Rallis prefers the Cardinals to not blitz too much.

When they do bring extra pressure, inside linebacker Mack Wilson can become more of a factor. It's important Wilson has upfield impact vs. the pass, because between him and Cody Simon, there's a real liability in coverage. That should also give Gibbens a chance to earn more snaps on third downs. With Baker playing the enforcer at strong safety, there is concern for a big dropoff in coverage at free safety with Jalen Thompson leaving in free agency. Dadrion Taylor-Demerson, a 2024 fourth-rounder, also is better

vs. the run than pass. The addition of Andrew Wingard from the Jaguars also provides another active upfield player.

The Cardinals can't seem to shake their periodic major issues in covering backs and tight ends. The carryover personnel suggest that will remain a weakness. At cornerback, the Cardinals are putting a lot outside on second-year draftees Will Johnson (second round) and Denzel Burke (fifth round) in projected starting roles. They will hope that in the nickel, Garrett Williams will improve to help with the safeties' inside coverage.

SPECIAL TEAMS

There's not much reason to change the field-goal and field-position approach, as the team figures to stick with kicker Chad Ryland and punter Blake Gillikin. New special teams coach Michael Ghobrial, with little worry there, will try to get game-changing plays on kickoff and punt returns with Duvernay. The two-time Ravens Pro Bowler has been with the Jaguars and Bears the past two seasons, unable to reproduce his early impact in Baltimore. But Duvernay provides more upside than Dortch, and the transitional offense will welcome any boost here.

BOTTOM LINE

The Cardinals literally can't sink further down in the division and conference pecking order. They also can't expect too much improvement when looking up at the Seahawks, Rams and 49ers. Moving on from Murray was a tough decision, but it was the right one. With multiple coaching staffs, the team had its peak with its one-time dynamic franchise QB. Brissett isn't meant to be the long-term replacement. Arizona's offense figures to get a bump with LaFleur leading and the addition of Love, but the defense had little-to-no veteran upgrades. The Cardinals should be happy and fortunate to get to five wins with some fair progress in reevaluation mode.

Mack Wilson Sr.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

New head coach: Mike LaFleur
Former Rams offensive coordinator, 2023–25
Former Jets offensive coordinator, 2021–22
Offensive coordinator: Nathaniel Hackett
Defensive coordinator: Nick Rallis
Special teams coordinator: Michael Ghobrial

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: Matt Schaub
Running backs: Matt Merritt
Wide receivers: Tony Sorrentino
Tight ends: Jake Moreland
Offensive line: Justin Frye
Assistant offensive line: Chris Cook
Pass game specialist: Connor Senger
Offensive quality control: Brett Ekkens

DEFENSE

Defensive line: Pete Kwiatkowski
Assistant defensive line: Alec Osborne
Outside linebackers: Matt Feeney
Inside linebackers: Rod Wilson
Defensive backs: Cristian Garcia
Cornerbacks: Zac Etheridge
Senior defensive assistant: Teryl Austin
Defensive quality control: Brent Jackson

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	3–14	17.7%	0–6	1–7	2–7
2024–25	8–9	47.1%	3–3	6–3	2–6
2023–24	4–13	23.5%	0–6	2–6	2–7
2022–23	4–13	23.5%	1–5	1–7	3–5
2021–22	11–7	61.1%	4–3	3–5	8–2
2020–21	8–8	50.0%	2–4	4–4	4–4
2019–20	5–10–1	33.3%	1–5	2–5–1	3–5
2018–19	3–13	18.8%	2–4	1–7	2–6
2017–18	8–8	50.0%	3–3	5–3	3–4
2016–17	7–8–1	46.7%	4–1–1	4–3–1	3–5
2015–16	14–4	77.8%	4–2	7–2	7–2
2014–15	11–6	64.7%	3–3	7–1	4–5
2013–14	10–6	62.5%	2–4	6–2	4–4
2012–13	5–11	31.3%	1–5	4–4	1–7
2011–12	8–8	50.0%	4–2	6–2	2–6
2010–11	5–11	31.3%	1–5	4–4	1–7
2009–10	11–7	61.1%	4–2	5–4	6–3
2008–09	12–8	60.0%	6–0	8–2	4–5
2007–08	8–8	50.0%	3–3	6–2	2–6
2006–07	5–11	31.3%	4–2	3–5	2–6

Los Angeles Rams

The Rams enjoyed an outstanding 2025 season, finishing 12-5 in a hyper-competitive NFC West and winning two road playoff games before falling in the NFC championship game. Matthew Stafford not only stayed fully healthy, but at 37, played at the highest level of his career, winning his first MVP while leading the league with 4,707 passing yards and 46 TDs. With Stafford and a solid complementary running game (7th in the NFL at 126.6 yards per game), the Rams led the NFL in both total offense (394.6 yards per game) and scoring offense (30.5 points per game).

The Rams' young defense adopted a bend, but don't break philosophy for much of 2025, finishing a respectable 10th in scoring defense, its best showing since 2020. A career year for Stafford put any retirement speculation to bed as the Rams enter 2026 among the inner circle Super Bowl favorites. The blueprint is certainly there for Sean McVay to reach a third Super Bowl after returning much of the core along with a few splashy upgrades.

RUNNING GAME

Kyren Williams has become one of the league's most reliable backs, posting his second straight season with at least 1,200 rushing yards and 10 touchdowns in 2025. Dating back to his breakout season in 2023 in which he led the NFL in rushing yards per game, only three running backs—Derrick Henry (44), Jahmyr Gibbs (39) and Jonathan Taylor (36)—have as many rushing touchdowns as Williams (36). Just as important, he has proved durable, playing in 33 of the past 34 games. The Rams are careful not to overwork Williams. He hit his sweet spot

Matthew Stafford

Kyren Williams

by Vinnie Iyer

averaging 17 touches per game, which could get him into a rhythm and maintain his explosiveness without wearing him down.

A big part of the equation is having Blake Corum, a top-flight backup with a similar power running style. Corum supplemented Williams well with 746 rushing yards and 6 TDs, his fresh legs translating into 5.1 yards per carry which ranked among the league leaders. The Rams don't do anything sneaky to get that production out of their strong 1-2 punch. They are nasty between the tackles with left guard Steve Avila, center Coleman Shelton and right guard Kevin Dotson paving the way. Dotson in particular has become a dominant force in moving big defensive bodies.

What's not fair is the fact the Rams also can set up Williams and Corum well to burst outside. Right tackle Rob Havenstein picked the right offseason to retire, with athletic mauler Warren McClendon Jr. replacing him. Add left tackle Alaric Jackson and the Rams have a mighty case for fielding the NFL's best overall offensive line. There's no doubt the cumulative effect of their run blocking leads the league.

PASSING GAME

The Rams' dominant rushing potential makes everything come easier with Stafford's downfield passing. Not only did Stafford lead the NFL in yards and touchdown passes, he averaged the third-highest yards per attempt of his career. The O-line proved just as dominant in pass protection, keeping the 37-year-old MVP upright and allowing just 23 sacks, tied for fewest in the NFL.

Because of that powerful run game, no team made more frequent use of play-action passing. The Rams got the most out of Stafford with those packages by having him work under center. That was a devastating formula to generate big plays, with Stafford leading the league in completed air yards with 2,857. The Rams also topped the NFL with 72 pass plays of 20 yards or more.

He also had two top wide receivers, with Puka Nacua leading the league with 129 receptions and second with 1,715 receiving yards. After a couple of lackluster seasons, newcomer Davante Adams bounced back with a league-high 14 receiving TDs. From every part of the field, Nacua and Adams were there for Stafford, both averaging more than 13 yards per catch. Beyond Nacua and Adams, the Rams relied on a tight end by committee with Colby Parkinson, Tyler Higbee, Davis Allen and Terrance Ferguson combining for 150 targets, 1,128 yards and 17 touchdowns. The Rams featured three tight ends on the field a league-high 31 percent of plays. They doubled down on tight ends in the draft, selecting Ohio State's Max Klare in the second round.

Because of how well they use wide receivers and tight ends, the Rams don't factor Williams or Corum much into the passing game beyond checkdowns or red zone plays. Their main job is to support the protection when the team is in obvious passing downs. While the Rams certainly caused a stir during the draft with the controversial selection of Alabama QB Ty Simpson with the 13th overall pick, that shouldn't factor much—if at all—into 2026 plans. Though it's

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 10	vs. San Francisco (in Melbourne)	8:35 p.m.
2	Sept. 21	NEW YORK GIANTS	8:15 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Denver Broncos	8:20 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	at Philadelphia Eagles	1:00 p.m.
5	Oct. 12	BUFFALO BILLS	8:15 p.m.
6	Oct. 18	ARIZONA CARDINALS	4:05 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:25 p.m.
8	Nov. 1	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	4:05 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	at Washington Commanders	1:00 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Arizona Cardinals	4:05 p.m.
11		BYE WEEK	
12	Nov. 25	GREEN BAY PACKERS	8:00 p.m.
13	Dec. 3	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	8:15 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	at San Francisco 49ers	4:25 p.m.
15	Dec. 20	DALLAS COWBOYS	4:25 p.m.
16	Dec. 25	at Seattle Seahawks	8:15 p.m.
17	TBD	at Tampa Bay Buccaneers	TBD
18	TBD	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Matthew Stafford	Ty Simpson
RB	Kyren Williams	Blake Corum
WR	Puka Nacua	Jordan Whittington
WR	Davante Adams	CJ Daniels
WR	Konata Mumpfield	Xavier Smith
TE	Colby Parkinson	Tyler Higbee
LT	Alaric Jackson	AJ Arcuri
LG	Steve Avila	Justin Dedich
C	Coleman Shelton	Beaux Limmer
RG	Kevin Dotson	Keagen Trost
RT	Warren McClendon Jr.	David Quessenberry

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Kobie Turner	Larrell Murchison
NT	Poona Ford	Ty Hamilton
RDE	Braden Fiske	Tyler Davis
WLB	Byron Young	Josaiah Stewart
LILB	Nate Landman	Grant Stuard
RILB	Omar Speights	Shaun Dolac
SLB	Jared Verse	Desjuan Johnson
LCB	Jaylen Watson	Emmanuel Forbes Jr.
SS	Kamren Kinchens	Jaylen McCollough
FS	Kam Curl	Tanner Ingle
RCB	Trent McDuffie	-

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Harrison Mevis	Ethan Evans

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	13	QB	Ty Simpson
2	61	TE	Max Klare
3	93	T	Keagen Trost
6	197	WR	CJ Daniels
7	232	DT	Tim Keenan III

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	46	TE	Terrance Ferguson
3	90	DE	Josaiah Stewart
4	117	RB	Jarquez Hunter
5	148	DL	Ty Hamilton
5	172	LB	Chris Paul Jr.

2024

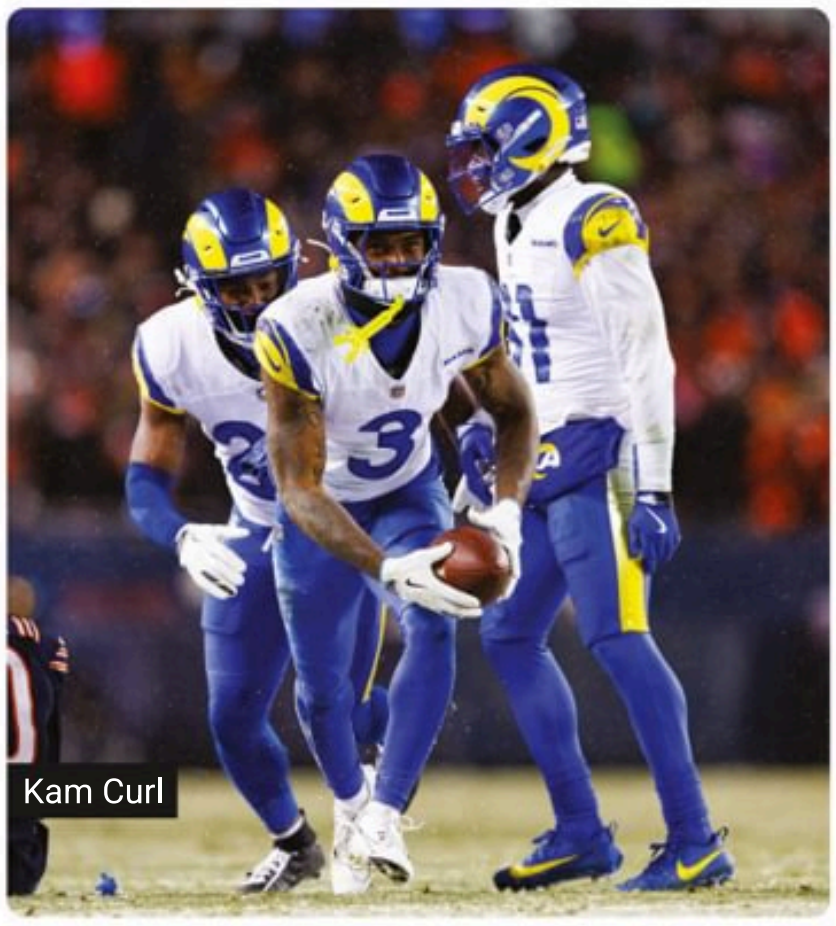
Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	19	EDGE	Jared Verse
2	39	DT	Braden Fiske
3	83	RB	Blake Corum
3	99	S	Kamren Kinchens
5	154	WR	Brennan Jackson

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	36	G	Steve Avila
3	69	WR	Tank Dell
3	77	DE	Byron Young
3	89	DT	Kobie Turner
4	128	QB	Stetson Bennett

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
3	104	G	Logan Bruss
4	142	CB	Decobie Durant
5	164	RB	Kyren Williams
6	211	S	Quentin Lake
6	212	CB	Derion Kendrick



Kam Curl

fair to question if the Rams would have been better off addressing an immediate need to help Stafford win in 2026, it remains an offense without any glaring holes. The Rams have retained most of their offensive line and skill players. With McVay still calling the plays, barring injury, they should expect to execute in the passing game with many of the same concepts that worked so well in 2025.

RUN DEFENSE

The Rams were No. 12 against the run last season, allowing an average of 110.8 rushing yards per game. Opponents ran about only 26 times per game against them, calling runs 41 percent of the time, though largely a result of teams forced into throwing often to keep up with Los Angeles' league-best scoring. Los Angeles' three-man front has two tough run stuffers in Kobie Turner and nose tackle Poona Ford, who was a steal of an acquisition. Much like not doing much fancy to get the job done on offense, the Rams count on Turner and Ford to eat up blockers and allow inside linebackers Nate Landman and Omar Speights to be effective clean-up tacklers.

The Rams take an old-school baseball-borrowed approach of featuring strength up the middle. Behind Ford, Landman and Speights lurks safety Kam Curl, re-signed for his elite run-supporting traits. In addition, edge rusher Byron Young is a complete outside linebacker who uses his 250-pound frame just as well against the run and opposite him, Jared Verse holds his own. Offensive strengths and game scripts limit the number of snaps the Rams' defense must operate against the run. But when they do, they are up to the challenge of further forcing teams into one-dimensional passing mode.

PASS DEFENSE

For facing high volume and having some issues in cornerback coverage, the Rams were respectable with the No. 19 pass defense, allowing on average 216.7 yards per game. Digging deeper, they allowed only 6.8 yards per attempt (13th) and an 87.0 opponents' passer rating (9th). The Rams wouldn't have done that without a productive pass rush. Their consistent pressure added up to 47 sacks last season, tied with

the stingy Texans and Seahawks for No. 7 in the NFL. As one would expect, the Rams are traditional in how they get job done here, too. Los Angeles blitzed only 18 percent of the time last season, the second-lowest rate in the league.

The Rams don't need to worry about much being different here, either, starting with defensive coordinator Chris Shula staying put. The front seven foundation will keep setting the tone for how well the team fares vs. the pass. The big change comes in the secondary. Curl and Kamren Kinchens hold down safety between two new starting corners, former Chiefs Trent McDuffie (via trade) and Jaylen Watson (via free agency). McDuffie and Watson are well versed in playing off each other like they did in Kansas City. McDuffie, at 5-11, 193, can stick with a variety of receivers with solid coverage. He's done well outside but also can be an ace in the slot. Watson (6-2, 197) is more of the physical enforcer in a bigger frame, not as dominant in coverage but also capable of

Harrison Mevis

making big plays on the ball and helping out vs. the run and blitzing whenever needed. The Rams were smart to keep the pair together because their styles mesh so well together. Between McDuffie and Watson, the Rams also remain above average with nickel back Quentin Lake.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Rams made changes of late with their kicker and punter, but have settled well on their big-legged, strong-framed options. Harrison Mevis has proved to put all of his 245-pound power into his field-goal attempts. Ethan Evans has about 10 pounds on Mevis when out there to punt and hold on Mevis' tries. There is some boom to go around with both young stars.

When factoring in coverage and return units, McVay was disappointed with this group overall at times last season, leading to the firing of Chase Blackburn. The Rams went big for an upgrade with ace new special teams coordinator Bubba Ventrone who learned under Bill Belichick in New England along with more recent stints in Indianapolis and Cleveland. Promoted offensive coordinator Nathan Scheelhaase might generate more buzz, but landing Ventrone to lead the third phase is the true upgrade.

BOTTOM LINE

The Rams, through all 22 of their starters and key reserves, got better and overall shored up their limited weaknesses in the secondary and on special teams. McVay and Shula give the team a high floor to at least match 12 wins, but the team is now set up to find its ceiling with 13 wins or more to wrestle the division crown right back from the Seahawks.

The lofty Super Bowl–winning expectations are reasonable. Given McVay already has reached that goal, as well as falling just short of it, ending the playoffs with a ring is the only way to mark this season a success. The window is wide open while Stafford has yet to shut the doors on his career and the Rams need to take advantage, one more time.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Sean McVay
First season with Rams: 2017
Regular-season record with Rams: 92–57 (61.7%)
Offensive coordinator: Nathan Scheelhaase
Defensive coordinator: Chris Shula
Special teams coordinator: Ray Ventrone

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Assistant head coach: Kliff Kingsbury
Associate coordinator/quarterbacks: Dave Ragone
Running backs: Ron Gould
Wide receivers: Rob Calabrese
Assistant wide receivers: Robert Woods
Tight ends: Scott Huff
Assistant tight ends: Dan Shamash
Offensive line: Ryan Wendell
Assistant offensive line: Brian Allen / Zak Kromer

DEFENSE

Defensive line/run game coordinator: Giff Smith
Outside linebackers: Joe Coniglio
Inside linebackers: Greg Williams
Defensive backs/pass game coordinator: Jimmy Lake
Safeties: Chris Beake
Assistant defensive backs: Michael Hunter
Pass rush coordinator: Drew Wilkins
Senior defensive assistant: Robert Wright

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	14–6	70.0%	4–3	7–1	6–5
2024–25	11–8	57.9%	4–2	5–4	5–4
2023–24	10–8	55.6%	5–1	5–3	5–5
2022–23	5–12	29.4%	1–5	4–5	1–7
2021–22	16–5	76.2%	5–3	8–3	8–2
2020–21	11–7	61.1%	4–3	6–2	5–5
2019–20	9–7	56.3%	3–3	4–3	4–4
2018–19	15–4	79.0%	6–0	8–1	7–2
2017–18	11–6	64.7%	4–2	3–5	7–1
2016–17	4–12	25.0%	2–4	1–6	3–5
2015–16	7–9	43.8%	4–2	5–3	2–6
2014–15	6–10	37.5%	2–4	3–5	3–5
2013–14	7–9	43.8%	1–5	5–3	2–6
2012–13	7–8–1	46.7%	4–1–1	4–3	3–4–1
2011–12	2–14	12.5%	0–6	1–7	1–7
2010–11	7–9	43.8%	3–3	5–3	2–6
2009–10	1–15	6.3%	0–6	0–8	1–7
2008–09	2–14	12.5%	0–6	1–7	1–7
2007–08	3–13	18.8%	1–5	1–7	2–6
2006–07	8–8	50.0%	2–4	4–4	4–4

San Francisco 49ers

The 49ers had another big rebound season under Kyle Shanahan in 2025. After falling back out of the playoffs in 2024 at a 6-11 injury-riddled year following their overtime losing appearance in Super Bowl 58 against the Chiefs, the 49ers jumped on a favorable last-place tinged schedule to go 12-5. Unfortunately, in the loaded NFC West, that was only good enough to move up to third place behind the 14-3 Seahawks and the same-record Rams. The three-team division race came down to the wire and the thought was the best team of the three would win the Super Bowl. That did happen with Seattle winning the ring in Super Bowl 60, ironically in Santa Clara at the Niners' home stadium. Considering the Rams' Super Bowl 56 win, San Francisco's coming up just short is a bit more painful than you might think.

The close-but-no-cigar finishes have some fans getting antsy about Shanahan's job security. Only Andy Reid has been with his team longer and Shanahan, much like rival Sean McVay with the Rams, has piloted the 49ers since 2017. His pedigree and offensive acumen has given the 49ers a chance to compete for NFC titles when healthy on that side of the ball. In recent seasons, inconsistency on defense and an incredible amount of injuries have hampered San Francisco most in its quest to end a Super Bowl–winning drought that's now extended to 31 years.

The 49ers did overcome some key injuries last season, with defensive stars Nick Bosa and Fred Warner being the costliest casualties. Now the 49ers are hoping the torn Achilles suffered by incomparable tight end George Kittle won't hamper them early in 2026. He has said he wants to return by Week 1, but GM John Lynch pumped the breaks on that statement throughout the spring. San Francisco has a new look on offense at receiver, and once again had to replace coordinator Robert Saleh as the leader of the defense. Their schedule won't be easy, so it's a good thing they still have plenty of core talent to navigate through it well.

Brock Purdy

RUNNING GAME

The 49ers were in an unusual position last season. A Shanahan offense ranking No. 25 in average rushing yards per game (106.9) is shocking enough. Then add the fact the 49ers averaged only 3.8 yards per carry as a team. Feature back Christian McCaffrey, whose career average is 4.6 yards per carry, wasn't immune, with a career-low 3.9. That still didn't keep the 49ers from giving McCaffrey 18-plus carries a game. The 49ers didn't try to limit the calling of running plays (44 percent) to maintain the balance needed for quarterback Brock Purdy to maximize the downfield passing game with his big arm.

San Francisco's biggest run blocking strength lies outside. Left tackle Trent Williams and right tackle Colton McKivitz are two of the league's best at their respective positions. Williams isn't slowing down at 38 and was rewarded with another contract extension. McKivitz was locked up for extra years in 2025. The 49ers are pretty good inside with center Jake Brendel but after losing Aaron Banks in free agency, they should look to improve their guard play to restore their familiar athletic run blocking efficiency. Although McCaffrey is skilled at turning the corner, the team needs to go back to executing better between the tackles.

San Francisco is always a better running team with a healthy Kittle supporting the front five. Fullback Kyle Juszczyk remains a valuable all-around blocker, too. The 49ers' new wide receiver, future Hall of Famer and former Buccaneer Mike Evans, is also known for using all of his 6-foot-5, 231 pounds to block at a high level downfield. With the inconsistent running game and a leaky, banged

Christian McCaffrey

by Vinnie Iyer

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 10	vs. L.A. Rams (in Melbourne)	8:35 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	MIAMI DOLPHINS	4:25 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	ARIZONA CARDINALS	4:05 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	DENVER BRONCOS	4:25 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	at Seattle Seahawks	4:25 p.m.
6	Oct. 19	WASHINGTON COMMANDERS	8:15 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	at Atlanta Falcons	1:00 p.m.
8		BYE WEEK	
9	Nov. 8	LAS VEGAS RAIDERS	4:05 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Dallas Cowboys	4:25 p.m.
11	Nov. 22	vs. Minnesota (in Mexico City)	8:20 p.m.
12	Nov. 29	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	4:25 p.m.
13	Dec. 6	at New York Giants	1:00 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	LOS ANGELES RAMS	4:25 p.m.
15	Dec. 17	at Los Angeles Chargers	8:15 p.m.
16	Dec. 27	at Kansas City Chiefs	4:25 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	PHILADELPHIA EAGLES	8:20 p.m.
18	TBD	at Arizona Cardinals	TBD

up defense, the 49ers had to throw more to McCaffrey as an extension of it. He ended up with 102 receptions on an incredible 129 targets, leading the league with 413 total touches. The 49ers would like to get more from running McCaffrey with lesser volume so he doesn't get overworked.

The 49ers also need to reconsider their backup plan with Brian Robinson Jr. leaving for the Falcons. There will be a competition on the depth chart to figure out the best next man up to give McCaffrey the relief he needs to stay fresh in his age-30 season. San Francisco once again selected a running back in the middle rounds of the NFL Draft by acquiring Indiana RB Kaelon Black. Maybe this time it will finally pay off.

PASSING GAME

Purdy had a strong season when healthy for his nine games. The 49ers also were smart to back him up with Mac Jones, an ideal fit in Shanahan's offense. Jones was an efficient supersub in his seven starts. There was no QB controversy, however, with Purdy's superior deep passing (to almost every other passer in the league) being the difference. Both quarterbacks completed more than 69 percent of their passes with 280-plus each, with Purdy averaging 7.6 yards per attempt vs. Jones' 7.4

The combined similar results added up to the No. 5 passing offense in the NFL, averaging 244.5 yards per game. They also were No. 6 in passer rating at 98.8. The 33 TD passes were good for fourth in the league. With Purdy missing time, the 49ers went from leading the league with 66 pass plays of 20 yards or more to 13th with 51. San Francisco wants to restore the field-stretching explosiveness, which in turn will better open up the running lanes for McCaffrey.

Enter Evans. His career-opening 1,000-yard streak ended during his final season with the Buccaneers, his 12th in the league. The future Hall of Famer was limited to eight games with a broken collarbone and concussion. Although he posted a career-low 12.3 yards per catch, the 49ers hope at 33, Evans is rejuvenated for another season of big plays and double-digit scoring as the perfect fit to stretch the field for Purdy's big arm. The 49ers are moving on without Jauan Jennings and past the Brandon Aiyuk drama. Evans is joined by venerable slot addition Christian Kirk to help 2024 first-rounder Ricky Pearsall as a new group of

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Brock Purdy	Mac Jones
RB	Christian McCaffrey	Jordan James
WR	Mike Evans	De'Zhaun Stribling
WR	Ricky Pearsall	Demarcus Robinson
WR	Christian Kirk	Jordan Watkins
TE	George Kittle	Jake Tonges
LT	Trent Williams	Carver Willis
LG	Robert Jones	Brett Toth
C	Jake Brendel	Drake Nugent
RG	Dominick Puni	-
RT	Colton McKivitz	Enrique Cruz Jr.

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	C.J. West	Sebastian Valdez
NT	Alfred Collins	Evan Anderson
RDE	Osa Odighizuwa	Gracen Halton
WLB	Nick Bosa	Sam Okuayinonu
LILB	Dre Greenlaw	Luke Gifford
RILB	Fred Warner	Tatum Bethune
SLB	Mykel Williams	Keion White
LCB	Deommodore Lenoir	Jack Jones
SS	Ji'Ayir Brown	Marques Sigle
FS	Malik Mustapha	Darrick Forrest
RCB	Renardo Green	Nate Hobbs

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Eddy Pineiro	Corliss Waitman

Deommodore Lenoir

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	33	WR	De'Zhaun Stribling
3	70	OLB	Romello Height
3	90	RB	Kaelon Black
4	107	DT	Gracen Halton
4	127	T	Carver Willis

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	11	DE	Mykel Williams
2	43	DT	Alfred Collins
3	75	LB	Nick Martin
3	100	CB	Upton Stout
4	113	DT	CJ West

2024

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	31	WR	Ricky Pearsall
2	64	CB	Renardo Green
3	86	OL	Dominick Puni
4	124	S	Malik Mustapha
4	129	RB	Isaac Guerendo

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
3	99	K	Jake Moody
3	101	TE	Cam Latu
5	155	CB	Darrell Luter
5	173	EDGE	Robert Beal
6	216	LB	Dee Winters

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
2	61	DE	Drake Jackson
3	93	RB	Tyrion Davis-Price
3	105	WR	Danny Gray
4	134	OT	Spencer Burford
5	172	CB	Samuel Womack

starting wideouts. San Francisco also selected Ole Miss WR De'Zhaun Stribling, who was a late riser in the NFL Draft process.

Kittle batted through another injury-hampered regular season before tearing his Achilles in January. He also had a career-low in yards per reception with 11.0, anomalous to his own ability to stretch the middle of the field. The 49ers expect him to do whatever he can to get back to playing with Purdy as the pair have shown an uncanny chemistry on longer passes. Should Purdy help Evans and Kittle restore their downfield pop, the 49ers would be a nightmare to cover all the way through the red zone.

The 49ers need some breaks with the health of both veterans, considering Kittle also will be 33 in October. Kirk and Pearsall have had their share of durability issues, too. Jennings and Aiyuk flashed big-time for Purdy, but now he must get it done with other wideouts. Purdy doesn't need to worry about being well protected to take his shots. He was sacked only 11 times in 9 games and knows he has a happy Williams back to dominate in pass protection. Some would say Purdy hasn't lived up to his massive franchise QB contract yet. Despite his production, there always will be critics. He can silence them more by putting up a big season with Evans and the remixed receiving corps.

RUN DEFENSE

The 49ers were solid against the run in 2025, ranking 11th in the NFL in allowing an average of only 107.8 yards per game. They also limited opponents to 4.3 yards per carry and calling run plays 43 percent of the time. San Francisco got only a little more than a game from Bosa, who tore the ACL in his right knee in Week 2. Their elite middle linebacker, Warner, was lost in Week 6 with a right ankle fracture. The 49ers didn't break down vs. the run because they played sound team defense with good tackling on every level for their returning coordinator Robert Saleh. Saleh, however, left for another head-coaching shot with the Titans, prompting the team to make a big philosophical change by hiring Raheem Morris to replace him.

The former Falcons coach, who once led the Rams' Super Bowl–winning defense, is implementing his hybrid 3-4 base alignment concepts. Warner is fully healthy and reunited with his top run-stopping teammate Dre Greenlaw, who spent only one season in Denver before returning. Bosa and second-year first-rounder Mykel Williams should be better positioned to contribute vs. the run moving to outside linebacker. Behind Warner and Greenlaw, Ji'Ayir Brown and Malik Mustapha can provide solid support from safety. That's the core group containing the run up the middle. Now they have more help from a more complete defensive tackle via free agency. Former Cowboy Osa Odighizuwa was meant to play end in the 3-4 with his disruptive skills. The 49ers figure to be a little better vs. the run with how they are aligned with Bosa and Warner in the lineup for a full season.

PASS DEFENSE

The 49ers were No. 25 against the pass last season, giving up on average 232.4 yards per game. They allowed passers to rate 100.5, No. 27 in the league. There was a clear culprit for those struggles: a lacking pass rush. With Bosa going down early, the 49ers struggled to put pressure on quarterbacks. They had a league-worst 20 sacks. Since retired Bryce Huff and Clelin Ferrell led the team, tied with only 4 sacks. Saleh didn't blitz to compensate, knowing it would be an extra coverage burden on the secondary.

Morris did help the Falcons shoot up to 57 sacks from 31 sacks in 2024. That improvement in production put Atlanta at No. 2, behind only Denver. Morris did it a lot more with blitzing (34 percent), as only the Vikings blitzed more last season. Having a healthy Bosa alone will boost the total by 10-plus. Warner and Greenlaw figure to be put more to work upfield in rushing the passer. Nickel back Upton Stout will also be unlocked more as a blitzer. Morris had 16 players get sacks for him in Atlanta, indicating he can bring pressure from everywhere. He is good at disguising from where the pressure is coming and mixing up the roles of front seven personnel. The 49ers will get to the quarterback at a much higher rate.

The 49ers are fine in coverage with Warner and Greenlaw. Deommodore Lenoir is a solid top corner, while No. 2 Renardo Green and Stout are improving works in progress. At safety, Brown is a natural ballhawk in coverage and has the potential when healthy to have a massive breakout fourth season.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The 49ers have found another kicker as good as Robbie Gould with his accuracy on field goals in Eddy Piniero, now in an experienced groove. Jon Weeks also gives the team a top long snapper. The big change comes at punter, as the 49ers replaced Thomas Morstead with former Steeler Corliss Waitman to get a little younger. San Francisco's return game and coverage units will keep this area as a strength under savvy special teams coordinator Brant Boyer.

BOTTOM LINE

The 49ers have the overall talent to challenge for the NFC West title they haven't won since 2023. The Rams will be a formidable division (and conference) rival once again, and the Super Bowl champion Seahawks won't be sliding much. San Francisco overcame several key injuries because of so many breaks in the schedule last season. For the team to make another Super Bowl under Shanahan, it will need health and more impactful overall defense on its side.

Nick Bosa

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Kyle Shanahan
First season with 49ers: 2017
Regular-season record with 49ers: 82–67 (55.0%)
Offensive coordinator: Klay Kubiak
Defensive coordinator: Raheem Morris
Special teams coordinator: Brant Boyer

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Run Game Coordinator: Joe Graves
Quarterbacks: Mick Lombardi
Running backs: Robert Turner
Wide receivers: Leonard Hankerson
Tight ends: Cameron Clemmons
Assistant offensive line: Roman Sapolu
Offensive assistant/wide receivers: Andrew Hayes-Stoker
Offensive assistant: Miguel Reveles
Offensive assistant/tight ends: Deuce Schwartz

DEFENSE

Defensive pass game coordinator: Jerry Gray
Defensive run game coordinator: Johnny Holland
Defensive line: Kris Kocurek
Assistant defensive line: Greg Scruggs
Linebackers: K.J. Wright
Defensive backs/cornerbacks: Ray Brown
Defensive quality control: Cameron Brown
Defensive quality control: Jake Lynch
Defensive quality control: Angel Matute

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	13–6	68.4%	4–3	5–3	8–3
2024–25	6–11	35.3%	1–5	4–5	2–6
2023–24	14–6	70.0%	5–1	7–3	7–2
2022–23	15–5	75.0%	7–0	10–1	4–4
2021–22	12–8	60.0%	2–5	4–4	8–4
2020–21	6–10	37.5%	3–3	1–5	5–3
2019–20	15–4	79.0%	5–1	8–2	7–1
2018–19	4–12	25.0%	1–5	4–4	0–8
2017–18	6–10	37.5%	1–5	3–5	3–5
2016–17	2–14	12.5%	2–4	1–7	1–7
2015–16	5–11	31.3%	1–5	4–4	1–7
2014–15	8–8	50.0%	2–4	4–4	4–4
2013–14	14–5	73.7%	5–2	6–2	7–3
2012–13	13–5–1	72.2%	3–2–1	7–1–1	6–3
2011–12	14–4	77.8%	5–1	8–2	6–2
2010–11	6–10	37.5%	4–2	4–3	1–7
2009–10	8–8	50.0%	5–1	6–2	2–6
2008–09	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2007–08	5–11	31.3%	3–3	3–5	2–6
2006–07	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5

Seattle Seahawks

The Seahawks shocked the NFL in 2025 by winning Super Bowl 60 after finishing the regular season 14-3 under second-year coach Mike Macdonald. Going against conventional modern wisdom, they did it with a dominant defense and a run-heavy offense. They were a complete team in taking the tough NFC West over the Rams and 49ers, which led to the needed home-field advantage to win the conference championship. Quarterback Sam Darnold performed well playing off that running game and defense.

Now he will need to operate without offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak and lead power back Kenneth Walker III, the Super Bowl 60 MVP. Those two leaving for new jobs in the AFC West were part of the typical personnel drain for the champion. Darnold will have reigning Sporting News Offensive Player of the Year Jaxon Smith-Njigba back as his dominant go-to wide receiver. Cooper Kupp and Rashid Shaheed remain in the complementary mix behind him and the offensive line strengths are intact.

Defensively, the key losses are end Boye Mafe from the edge rush rotation, big-play cornerback Riq Woolen and safety Coby Bryant. Given they are such a young team at many positions, the Seahawks avoided losing much of their core. Seattle has designs on repeating, a difficult task when just considering the loaded division. Everything fell into place last season, including limited injury impact and schematic synergy with the available talent.

RUNNING GAME

Walker is gone to Kansas City on a free-agent deal and the team's strong complementary back, Zach Charbonnet, suffered a torn ACL in his left knee during the January divisional playoff game vs. the 49ers. With Charbonnet on the mend, the Seahawks drafted Notre Dame running back Jadarian Price with the final pick of the first round. Price, who shared carries with No. 3 overall pick Jeremiyah Love at ND, will presumably be given a shot at RB1 in camp. Former Packers backup Emanuel Wilson and George Holani are two more options.

For a team that ran the ball 49.7 percent of the time throughout last season, that's a concern if Price is not ready. Only the Ravens and Bills relied on the run more as their offensive foundation. The Seahawks, for the volume of 507 carries (29.8 per game, fourth in the league), were No. 11 in rushing offense with 123.3 yards per game. They also weren't the most efficient with only 4.1 yards per carry. The Seahawks can rest assured their run blocking will remain the key asset for whoever gets the most carries. Left tackle Charles Cross is a good run blocker while right tackle Abraham Lucas is dominant. Left guard Grey Zabel, a rookie revelation, can emerge as one of his position's best.

The Seahawks used 11 personnel (three wide receivers) most of the time, but Kubiak mixed it up well with plenty of 12 (two tight ends) and 21 (fullback and tight end) looks. Tight end A.J. Barner got more opportunities as a receiver later because he was so valuable staying on the field for the rushing attack. Robbie Ouzts, a hybrid fullback, also was a mauler who helped Walker and Charbonnet. Seattle stuck with the run to get some steady production and also facilitate much of what it wanted to do passing with Darnold. The Seahawks were smart to replace Kubiak by borrowing again from the rival 49ers, hiring that team's former run game coordinator Brian Fleury as their offensive coordinator. Establishing the run and sticking with it shouldn't change. Until Charbonnet is healthy enough to return, Price will likely be given the bulk of the carries.

PASSING GAME

Passing half of the time, the Seahawks were No. 8 in the NFL with an average of 228.1 passing yards per game. Only the team they beat in the Super Bowl, the Patriots, bested the Seahawks' 8.4 yards per attempt. That allowed Seattle to rank so high in production, despite being 29th in passing attempts (an average of 19.1 per game). The Seahawks saw Darnold deliver with quality over quantity for Kubiak. The team was calculated with its use of play-action passing (14.1 percent) and not overexposing made it so dangerous downfield. Darnold completed 67.7 percent of his pass attempts. He did have interception issues, but he executed well when upright, taking only 27 sacks in 17 games.

Smith-Njigba, for his 119 receptions for a league-high 1,763 yards, still managed to produce an explosive 15.1 yards per catch. He alone saw 36 percent of the team's total targets. Smith-Njigba responded well from being the slot most of the time in 2024 to hardly running routes inside in 2025. The Seahawks unlocked Smith-Njigba as a big-play threat outside in the Tyler Lockett vein. Although not quite Russell Wilson with Lockett, Darnold to Smith-Njigba is close with the chemistry and downfield execution. Adding Kupp and then trading for Shaheed gave the Seahawks two better slot options and the alignment principles will continue with Fleury.

The 49ers used either 11 or 21 personnel most often last season, so the Seahawks figure to keep channeling that. Barner was second on the team with 52 catches. He has a big frame (6-6, 251 pounds) with soft hands and is still developing as a receiver. The versatility and big-play ability of the offense are intact in the passing game. The Seahawks threw to Walker and Charbonnet a combined 60 times last season. They don't need to deploy a back often in that area, but just enough to be comfortable checkdowns for Darnold when the downfield potential is there with Smith-Njigba and others.

by Vinnie Iyer

Sam Darnold

2026–27 SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
1	Sept. 9	NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS	8:20 p.m.
2	Sept. 20	at Arizona Cardinals	4:25 p.m.
3	Sept. 27	at Washington Commanders	1:00 p.m.
4	Oct. 4	LOS ANGELES CHARGERS	4:25 p.m.
5	Oct. 11	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	4:25 p.m.
6	Oct. 15	at Denver Broncos	8:15 p.m.
7	Oct. 25	KANSAS CITY CHIEFS	8:20 p.m.
8	Nov. 2	CHICAGO BEARS	8:15 p.m.
9	Nov. 8	ARIZONA CARDINALS	4:25 p.m.
10	Nov. 15	at Las Vegas Raiders	4:05 p.m.
11		BYE WEEK	
12	Nov. 29	at San Francisco 49ers	4:25 p.m.
13	Dec. 7	DALLAS COWBOYS	8:15 p.m.
14	Dec. 13	NEW YORK GIANTS	4:25 p.m.
15	Dec. 19	at Philadelphia Eagles	5:00 p.m.
16	Dec. 25	LOS ANGELES RAMS	8:15 p.m.
17	Jan. 3	at Carolina Panthers	1:00 p.m.
18	TBD	at Los Angeles Rams	TBD

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
QB	Sam Darnold	Drew Lock
RB	Zach Charbonnet	Jadarian Price
WR	Jaxon Smith-Njigba	Tory Horton
WR	Cooper Kupp	Jake Bobo
WR	Rashid Shaheed	Cody White
TE	AJ Barner	Elijah Arroyo
LT	Charles Cross	Josh Jones
LG	Grey Zabel	Christian Haynes
C	Jalen Sundell	Olu Oluwatimi
RG	Anthony Bradford	Beau Stephens
RT	Abraham Lucas	Mason Richman

DEFENSE

Position	Starter	Backup
LDE	Leonard Williams	Mike Morris
NT	Jarran Reed	Brandon Pili
RDE	Byron Murphy II	Rylie Mills
WLB	DeMarcus Lawrence	Ja'Markis Weston
LILB	Drake Thomas	Tyrice Knight
RILB	Ernest Jones IV	Patrick O'Connell
SLB	Uchenna Nwosu	Derick Hall
LCB	Devon Witherspoon	Nehemiah Pritchett
SS	Ty Okada	D'Anthony Bell
FS	Julian Love	Bud Clark
RCB	Josh Jobe	Julian Neal

SPECIALISTS

Kicker	Punter
Jason Myers	Michael Dickson

ANNUAL TOP FIVE DRAFT PICKS (2022–26)

2026

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	32	RB	Jadarian Price
2	64	S	Bud Clark
3	99	CB	Julian Neal
5	148	G	Beau Stephens
6	199	WR	Emmanuel Henderson Jr.

2025

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	18	G	Grey Zabel
2	35	S	Nick Emmanwori
2	50	TE	Elijah Arroyo
3	92	QB	Jalen Milroe
5	142	DT	Rylie Mills

2024

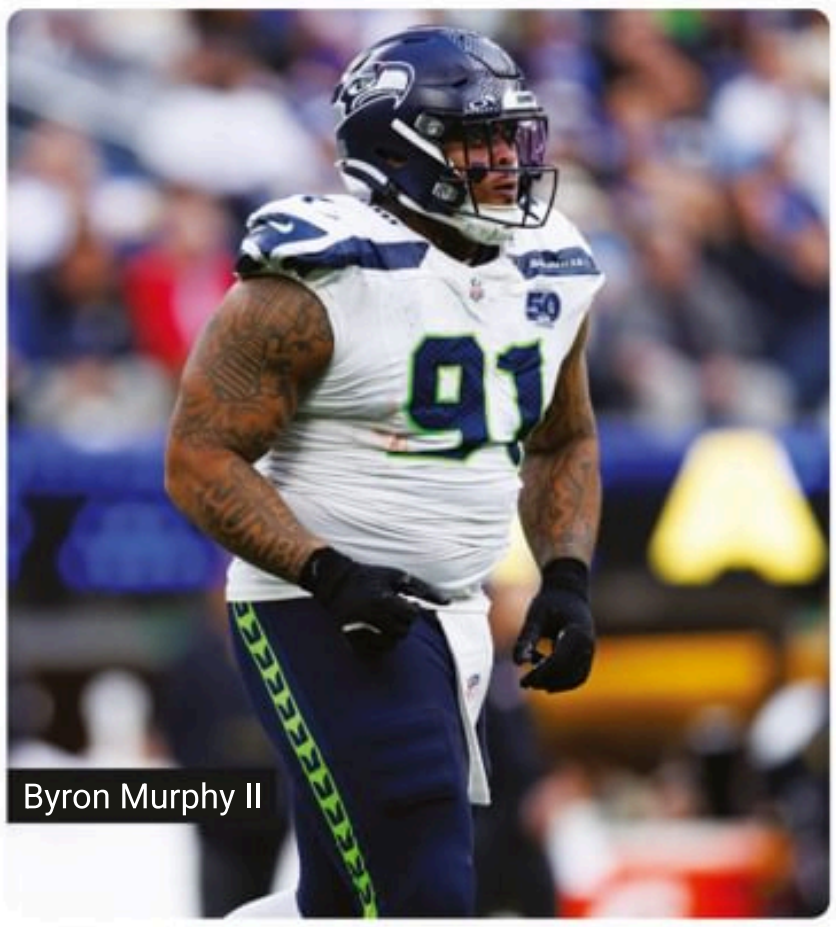
Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	16	DT	Byron Murphy
3	81	G	Christian Haynes
4	118	LB	Tyrice Knight
4	121	TE	AJ Barner
5	136	CB	Nehemiah Pritchett

2023

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	5	CB	Devon Witherspoon
1	20	WR	Jaxon Smith-Njigba
2	37	DE	Derick Hall
2	52	RB	Zach Charbonnet
4	108	G	Anthony Bradford

2022

Round	Overall	Position	Player
1	9	OT	Charles Cross
2	40	DE	Boye Mafe
2	41	RB	Kenneth Walker III
3	72	OT	Abraham Lucas
4	109	CB	Coby Bryant



Byron Murphy II

RUN DEFENSE

The Seahawks were No. 3 in the NFL and tops in the NFC with their run defense that allowed an average of only 91.9 rushing yards per game. They also allowed a league-low 3.7 yards per carry and nine rushing TDs, second in the league to the rival Rams. Because of Seattle's domination, teams gave up on the run often, with opponents only running 39 percent of the time. Leonard Williams is the linchpin setting the tone at 3-4 end. On the second level, long-time Cowboy DeMarcus Lawrence is an elite run-stopping edge, now well settled into playing weakside linebacker in Macdonald's system. Inside, Ernest Jones and Drake Thomas are strong upfield line-backers to finish against the run.

The front seven comes through well under the coaching of Macdonald and coordinator Aden Durde. They are well-positioned with fundamentals to slow down blockers up front and free up tackles on the next level. The Se-ahawks will miss Bryant support-ing the run from safety. But they also have hybrid nickel back Nick Emmanwori to help out inside. The real bonus is how well outside cornerbacks Devon Witherspoon and Josh Jobe diagnose the run and can come flying up to make additional plays against it.

PASS DEFENSE

The Seahawks had the No. 10 pass defense in the NFL last season, giving up on average 193.9 yards per game. They allowed a league-low 6.0 yards per opponents' passing attempts. They held quarterbacks to a 77.9 collective rating, good for fourth. Their 47 sacks tied them for No. 7. Seattle stops the run so well to make sure it can tee off and pressure teams into mistakes. The Seahawks also had 18 interceptions, the league's fifth-highest total. Bryant had four of those, but they are hoping Emmanwori and safety Julian Love can make more such plays on the ball. Jones is the glue of the linebacker corps and on top of fine run play, his coverage skills added up to a team-high five interceptions.

The Seahawks' takeaways were vital to cancel Darnold's giveaways. They also pulled an unique balanced pass rush, with

Leonard Williams

no one dominant player. They were most effective on the edges, with Williams and Murphy leading the team with seven sacks each, followed by Lawrence and oppo-site edge rusher Uchenna Nwosu with six. With the production of those four, the Seahawks don't blitz much with Macdonald. When they do, Emmanwori and Thomas can be the most effective chess pieces inside. The Seahawks often ensure they can rush with just four and have seven in coverage. They have a lot of players who can win battles from early downs to obvious passing situations.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Few teams have such massive game-changing weapons in the third phases. The Seahawks have them in all capacities through their coverage units under special teams coordinator Jay Harbaugh. Kicker Jason Myers is clutch and automatic in most situations through most conditions. The two-time Pro Bowler was the NFL's leading scorer in 2025 with his

41 field goals and 48 extra points. Punter Michael Dickson is the premier booming leg. The exciting Australian is coming off a second-team All-Pro nod after averaging 49 yards last season. Shaheed gave a spark to both the kickoff and punt return games when he came over midseason from New Orleans, which will carry over for Seattle. On a team full of strong groups, this might be the strongest.

BOTTOM LINE

The Seahawks took some hits but the biggest barrier in their quest for a repeat will be restoring the pop of their running game and Darnold cutting down turnovers while also staying sharp throwing deeper downfield. Seattle shouldn't want to mess much with their offensive formula minus Kubiak, but given his coaching was great enough to earn him a prime coaching job in Oakland, there will be some dropoff with Fleury. The Seahawks will hope to stay healthy with their offensive line and receivers to mitigate that.

The Seahawks survived some wild games vs. the 49ers and Rams to emerge as the best in the West. They had the right profile in the right season to get past both of those divisional rivals in the playoffs and were just a better version of the Patriots in Super Bowl 60. Expecting all of that to fall in place again will be difficult with more contenders rising. The defense, however, will not slump much with manageable production to replace. The Seahawks take a high winning floor into the season because of how they play the run and rush the passer.

Seattle won't be catching any of the NFC contending powers by surprise. The team has gone from a secret hunter to the clear hunted. Opponents will work to rattle Darnold more and try to limit Smith-Njigba's receiving impact. The Seahawks will be up for the challenge, armed with a still complete roster and the league's best home-field advantage. On the other hand, if Darnold can raise his game, this team can be a scarier version of the reigning champions.

HEAD COACH AND COORDINATORS

Head coach: Mike Macdonald
First season with Seahawks: 2024
Regular-season record with Seahawks: 24–10 (70.6%)
Offensive coordinator: Brian Fleury
Defensive coordinator: Aden Durde
Special teams coordinator: Jay Harbaugh

ASSISTANT COACHES

OFFENSE

Passing game coordinator/quarterbacks: Jake Peetz
Run game coordinator: Justin Outten
Quarterbacks: Tyson Prince
Running backs: Thomas Hammock
Wide receivers: Frisman Jackson
Tight ends: Mack Brown
Assistant tight ends: Michael Byrne
Offensive line: John Benton
Assistant offensive line: Quinshon Odom

DEFENSE

Defensive run game coordinator: Chris Partridge
Defensive line: Justin Hinds
Outside linebackers: Josh Bynes
Inside linebackers: Zach Orr
Passing game coordinator/defensive backs: Karl Scott
Safeties: Jeff Howard
Senior defensive assistant: Kirk Olivadotti
Defensive backs: Neiko Thorpe
Defensive quality control: Keller Chryst

PERFORMANCE CAPSULE (PAST 20 SEASONS)

Season	Win/Loss	Win %	Division	Home	Away
2025–26	17–3	85.0%	6–2	8–2	8–1
2024–25	10–7	58.8%	4–2	3–6	7–1
2023–24	9–8	52.9%	2–4	5–3	4–5
2022–23	9–9	50.0%	4–3	5–4	4–4
2021–22	7–10	41.2%	3–3	3–5	4–5
2020–21	12–5	70.6%	4–3	7–2	5–3
2019–20	12–6	66.7%	3–3	4–4	8–2
2018–19	10–7	58.8%	3–3	6–2	3–5
2017–18	9–7	56.3%	4–2	4–4	5–3
2016–17	11–6–1	64.7%	3–2–1	8–1	3–5–1
2015–16	11–7	61.1%	3–3	5–3	6–4
2014–15	14–5	73.7%	5–1	9–1	5–3
2013–14	16–3	84.2%	5–2	9–1	6–2
2012–13	12–6	66.7%	3–3	8–0	4–6
2011–12	7–9	43.8%	3–3	4–4	3–5
2010–11	8–10	44.4%	4–2	6–3	2–7
2009–10	5–11	31.3%	3–3	4–4	1–7
2008–09	4–12	25.0%	3–3	2–6	2–6
2007–08	11–7	61.1%	5–1	8–1	3–6
2006–07	10–8	55.6%	3–3	6–3	4–5

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